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Recommended Citation

Cowne, Sean R., "Wandering Man" (1996). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 5082.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.6956>

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THESIS APPROVAL


The abstract and thesis of Sean R. Cowne for the Master of Arts degree in English were presented May 8, 1996 and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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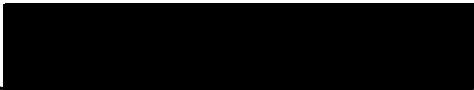

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Sean R. Cowne for the Master of Arts in English presented May 8, 1996.

Title: *Wandering Man*

The Old West of stories, movies, and folklore is of course a time and place that never existed, yet, over a century, has bloomed into an elaborate, romantic, sometimes tragic fantasy firmly rooted in the collective mythic consciousness of Americans. *Wandering Man* is a novel that attempts to accentuate the mythic tendencies of the Western subgenre, even at the expense of realism.

An attempt to recognize the American fascination with our nineteenth century westward expansion as a construction of myth is endeavored through deliberate parallels with stories universally deemed "mythic:" Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The protagonist of *Wandering Man* is based upon Odysseus, an Odysseus after the homecoming. This version of the Greek hero is similar to Dante's, as seen in the twenty-sixth canto of *Inferno*. Restless at home, Dante's Odysseus departs again, heading west in a small ship with a small band of men, until he had gone too far and was sucked up by a whirlpool near the mountain of Purgatory.

The protagonist of the present work toils himself in Purgatory, a purgatory of never-ending journey, of continuous process without goal. The work explores the paradox of the continuing American focus on expanding westward, an action that the nation can no longer undertake in the physical world, so, instead, endeavors in the dream world. Of course, this act of fancy, of illusory rumination, is one the author undertakes as well.

WANDERING MAN

by

SEAN R. COWNE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1996

1 Caly

Here, the wind blows cool but silent over the lake. The boat sits askew on the beach, unused since I arrived. She destroyed it once, splintering it into kindling, then mended it in an instant, having made her point. I would stay.

She's a stranger, but I have known her. I sit outside her cabin, on the ground below our window. My eyes look over black water to the distant shore. I am cold.

Water rolls up the beach, then fades back, lips of it leaving flecks of foam on the sand. With it, her voice--soft, fluid--calling me inside. I stand up and go in to her.

"Wandering man," she says, smiling, standing next to the table set with fruits, meats, cakes, wine. Her dusky skin glows in the candlelight, her body anointed. The pungence of olives soaking the room. Deep chestnut hair falls onto her breasts and it is soft to my touch.

She clasps my hand and we go into the chamber. The wind picks up the shells and clear wings of dead insects off the sill above the bed. They swirl out from the window, then drift onto us like snowflakes, or ashes. I am down, lost, dizzy, all is soft. Laughter--hers, mocking. The breeze seeping in is cold on my back.

Then we are sitting, our backs to the headboard, and her hand is placing a morsel of lamb into my mouth. I taste it, chew. Some juice runs down from my lips. She hands me a

bottle from the replete table that, I now notice, has appeared near the bed. Her eyes, for me, look curious but glancing quickly to the window, they smolder with some malevolence.

"You must tell me," she says.

I wonder how much she has tired of battle. Little, I suspect, for here in her place, she is as a god.

"From when, what place?" I ask.

She runs a finger down my neck, "I know some of your first trial, of your search, your other. You searched for her."

Searched.

She smiles, continues, "But the one who follows you I don't know. He is different . . . a terror."

There, she stops. I take some more wine, a cake, try to remember the beginning, the beginning of my second lot. I wonder how much to tell her.

"You can tell me everything," she says. I smile and quaff more wine, the bottleneck little wider than a gun barrel. But perhaps Everything will help me go.

"I will," I say, and so, I begin.

2 Death

He was so old that he remembered when the rails first came to Char Pass. He called me Sonny.

We rode on rocky ground a couple hundred yards above the timberline. The air was cold enough to make smoke out of our breath, but for autumn that high up in the mountains the weather was strangely mild. I had a woolen scarf wrapped round my neck, my hat pulled low, and my calfskin gloves held the reins to Olive, my horse. I was wondering just when the snow would begin to fall.

The old man had chosen this way so he'd be hard to track. He'd shot someone at the pass, it seemed, committed some crime or another. I hadn't asked. He talked 'bout bounty hunters and cursed trains. He talked more than I heard.

I guess it all began with him. He had shot at me at first. Thought I was someone else. Then he saw the buck on my back and the week-old camp nearby and realized I wasn't up there after him. After a few days of my venison and his talk, he decided to ride off. I did too and asked him if he'd mind.

"Nope," he'd said to me and I saw his eyes wandering to the locket that hung from my neck. I tucked it back in my shirt and rode off with him. That was a good while back.

We'd seen no signs of law or bounty hunters, though I knew there was one good one who rode this country. The old man must've known too, for he seemed afraid.

"Do you think it'll come down on us?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He started his roan on down the mountain and I followed. As the shoes of the horses scuffed and clopped on the granite mountainside, the wind began to pick up. Late afternoon, the gusts foretold the evening chill and I heard his horse snort, deep and wheezy. The cold seeped down to my bones and I pulled my coat closer in by the buttons. The sky was full of rolling gray clouds but just ahead of us lay the edge of a vast pine forest.

We rode in between the trunks just as the first dust-specks of snow began to dance in the wind. Among the trees, the breeze slithered and hummed. We wound our way down the mountain, the old man cursing as his roan carried him smacking through the brush. There in the forest, the needle canopy made it darker than it was higher up the mountain, so he couldn't see a lick. I rode ahead of the old man and grabbed his reins.

"This way," I said, shouting above the wind, "There's a stream." It was still a ways off, but I knew the country pretty well.

He hollered back that he didn't hear no stream, but he didn't resist. Olive led us due north, through pines that soon began to drip with rain. Water poured down from the clouds and teamed with the wind to pelt us down the mountain. I

heard the old man cough and hack and then I heard the stream.

Half a mile farther, through the trees and over brush, we came to it. The old man looked at me funny. I led his horse into the brook which flowed 'bout knee-high. We began to ride slowly down-stream.

"No branches," he said, waving his arm at the clearing the stream provided, "and no blasted trainsmoke neither. Say, what stream is this?"

"It's the start of the Plateau River."

He looked at me and spoke, "Hmff. . . . say, son, you never told me your name--"

Just then, his mare let out a loud whinny and bounded clear out of the water, hooves flailing and back arching. The old man's eyes bugged out as he was lifted up, but he held on. Then the horse plunged back down to the water, scrambling in terror. Water splashed and roared as the roan tried to escape some unknown dread. I was doused as was the old man, but he stayed on his horse so far as I could tell. Give him that.

His mount stumbled up the bank and bolted into the trees with the old man half on, bleeding and screaming, "Hell!"

I started the reins after him, but now even Olive began to rear. She took a step back and lowered her hindquarters. I patted her neck, said something, and looked down to the water.

A branch was wedged between two mossy rocks with a shawl of pale green lichen fingering out in the flowing water.

Clung to the branch was something white, and on that was something dull and gray. It was hard to see in the dying light. Gloaming, a hazy moon crept in the sky behind dark billows. I got off Olive and led her out of the water, to the bank where the old man had ridden. I heard him a ways off. Then I heard something else, a sort of weeping. Olive's reins dangling and my boots sloshing, we both turned and looked to the direction of the sound. Across the river came some sobbing, a high, muffled cry. A woman stood in a dark house dress, pointing to the river. What was she doing there? Something stirred behind her, in the trees--a horse grunting maybe--and the woman looked back quickly. She then turned to me and pointed again at the stream anxiously. I took a step forward and her pale face began to nod. I half slid down the short mud bank and stepped into the water. My legs splashed through the current and I came to the two mossy rocks. I looked up at the woman and saw that she leaned forward, hands on her knees. "Yes," her voice called out.

I took off my right glove and reached through the cold water to the body, catching hold of the dead white hand that gripped the branch. I clasped the ring on the fourth finger and twisted it off. Some whistling then came from just beyond the woman. I looked up and she was gone. The hairs on the back of my neck began to stand on end. I backed up with the cold metal inside my cupped palm. The whistling continued, strong

and wistful. I'd heard the tune before; it was one of his favorites.

"Your rose is gone my springborn child.
Your rose is gone my darling boy.
The frost has come, gone are nights mild,
The winds blow cold, the hounds howl wild.
Oh winter's come, my dying boy."

A rider burst through the trees on the other side of the brook. I stood in the water as his horse galloped towards me, the man on top no longer whistling but now laughing silently. I saw the old scars on his gray face and the familiar bone-handled irons at his sides. One of my brothers. His overcoat flowed back like a cape, as far as the tip of his gray gelding's tail. Like thunder, that beast charged through the water, past me, up the bank behind me, and into the woods.

As if from a daze, I shook and thought of the old man and stuck the ring in my coat pocket. I put on my glove, clamored out of the stream, jumped onto Olive, and rode.

Olive whinnied with pleasure as we crashed through the foliage. It was dark in the woods, but we had the sight. A hundred yards or so from the brook, into the forest, the underbrush cleared out, though the boughs grew no higher. Holding my hat in place, neck bent forward, I followed two sets

of horse tracks below, and I heard whistling ahead. *The winds blow cold, the hounds howl wild.*

I smacked Olive on the rump and speed welled up from her hooves and we shot ahead, faster. Pine, birch, and aspen whirred by and Olive's thumping hoofsteps set tempo to the awful whistling that haunted the forest. Finally, I saw figures up ahead.

The old man was trying to light a fire but was clumsy in the dark. Above him, to the left 'bout eight feet, sat the gray rider calmly, six-gun pointed down at the old man, who fumbled unaware. *Winter has come, my dying boy.*

I reached back to the scabbard on the side of my saddle and whipped out the repeater, cocking it with the motion. From my hip, and to the side of Olive's neck, I let it rip. The gun blast tore into the night and the bullet struck the rider hard in the upper right arm. It nearly blew him off his horse, but he held on and looked at me, puzzled.

I didn't think that'd be enough so I whip-cocked the carbine and blasted once more. This time, lead kissed his right cheek, roundly, maybe even clean through the left as well. He shook his head violently and looked at me as Olive carried me to him. His eyes blazed with rage and I cocked again. This time, however, he reined in the gelding, spun around, and took off through the trees.

My heart kept pace with Olive's hooves; as I soothed her and asked her to slow, my heart began to as well. The old man lay flat on the ground ahead, belly down.

"What the hell is goin' on?" he bellowed, "Who's there?" He was pulling out his revolver.

Under my coat, in my shirt pocket, I found matches. I lit one so he could see my face and tossed the box down to him.

"Light a fire," I said, "We're camping here."

"Fire--hell! Why were you shooting at me?" He still held the gun, pointed somewhere in my general direction.

"I didn't shoot at you."

"What then? The moon?"

"There was a man pointing a gun at you."

"What? What are you saying?"

"What did you do at the pass, old man?"

Silence.

"I can show you the tracks in the morning, if you want," I said.

More silence, then, "Was it the law?"

Sort of. "No. Bounty hunter, I reckon."

I began setting camp. He cursed and started on the fire.

"Mighty good hunter. Hell, no matter where, they gonna find you." And he mumbled on, to himself, for most of the night.

With his muttering, and with what had happened and what I'd done, I couldn't sleep. I sat next to the fire, drying my boots. Agitated, cold, and wondering 'bout the woman and the ring, I was feeling more than a bit restless. I got up a couple hours before dawn and saddled Olive. I left the old man snoring and mumbling, and set out to find where the hunter had gone.

Just out of camp, it was easy, for his beast had crashed right through some sprawling ferns and had trampled on through a large patch of highland moss. After that, the tracks led over the frost-covered, pine needle loam. Though the frost now covered everything, I could still make out the indentations in the forest floor. I was thankful we were no longer higher up in the mountains, as last night it had surely snowed above the timberline. Couldn't track spoor buried under a foot of powder.

His horse was a big one and its spoor was deep and wide. I followed a good while until I came to a tremendous pine. Here, the trail suddenly stopped. I looked all 'round, got off my horse, even walked 'round the tree--no tracks. Finally, I looked up the tree. A raven sat on a burly branch, looking down at me. The tracks were gone; I was out of luck. Olive bobbed her head and we rode back to camp.

There, the old man still slept. He lay curled up, like a young boy, looking rather silly and sickly. I wondered how anyone could sleep on a night like this. He was old, though, old enough to turn away when demons breathed down his neck. I

watched him awhile and pondered. I could ride back across the river, to see if I could follow the gray rider's tracks that way.

I did. Found 'em just up the far bank and followed 'em through the shoreline brush and then twixt the tall pines. They went back upstream for a couple miles, never very far from the water. Olive took me along, weaving 'round the trees, and I ducking my head below branches. After a bit, I heard the clank of someone cooking on an open fire. I rode a little further and then smelled the bacon, heard it sizzling, and heard someone stirring something with a spoon in a tin cup.

I looked down and saw that the tracks did come from that direction. Unhitching my sidearm, I walked through the pines and over some fallen logs. The tracks came straight from the source of the sounds, and there I went, veering left with 'em down to a grove of young firs. I followed the tracks between the soft fir sprigs of sibling trees and stepped into a man's camp.

He was squatting at a fire, making biscuits. His clothes were dirty, as was his skin. He looked at me and reached for a shotgun that leaned barrel up on a fallen log. I drew quick and pulled the hammer back.

"No," I said.

He stopped and stared at me, still squatting. I surveyed his camp and saw a mess. Coffee grounds were scattered, small bones, tins opened and unopened, pots, pans, blankets, a dress,

a wooden box, to the right a buckboard with a couple mules still hitched, and off to the left, just skirting the camp went the tracks, coming from what looked like a grave marker set in undug soil.

"What do you want?" he asked and his eyes hovered above sad gray bags.

"I'm looking for a rider who came this way on a big, gray gelding."

He looked at me blankly.

"Big man, scars on his face," I continued.

"No," he said, "I ain't seen him."

I stood there a while, holding my gun. I spoke: "That don't look like a grave. What's the marker?"

"My wife drowned in the river. Couldn't find her body."

I thought 'bout what I'd seen downstream, holstered my gun.

"You married long?"

"Two years."

"Children?"

"No, lost one to fever."

"Your wife have any trinkets? Any little knick-knacks she wore?"

"What? Why you ask?" He stood up slowly.

I started to respond but he interrupted, "Just the ring I give her. Why do you ask?"

"I found a ring on a rock downstream."

"You what? Let me see!"

I fished it out of my pocket and, for the first time, really looked at it. It was not a dull gray at all but rather a clean, white gold with a diamond set upon it. I handed it to him and he fell to his knees, holding the ring to his chest like an infant.

"I gave it to her out in Bay City. I gave this to her. Did you find the--did you see her? . . . No, no, never mind that."

He sat back in the dirt and talked of his wife. My mind wandered as he did and I walked over to the marker. The big tracks began there, nowhere else. They just appeared. But the man said he'd seen no rider and I believed him.

Strange how the hunter works. I pulled out my flask of whisky, took some, and offered it to the man, still talking. He paused long enough to drink, handed back the flask, and went on. He blubbered on and he stunk, so soon I walked back to Olive. Mounting the saddle, I turned to look at the man. He was staring at the ring, mouthing some words I could not hear. The locket clinked against the flask in my shirt pocket as Olive began her trot.

I got back to camp 'bout daybreak and there the old man stood, gnawing on some jerky and saddling the roan. I noticed that his clothes were still wet, and that he was shivering.

"Where'd you find her?" I asked.

He coughed a few times, spit, cursed, and said, "This damn horse always comes back."

And then he grabbed the pommel with shaking, torn hands, lacerated, I gathered, by his reins in the commotion yesterday. He pulled himself up slowly and spoke.

"I didn't see no tracks."

"Your eyes ain't much, old man."

"Yeah," he said as he spurred on his horse, "yeah."

We rode down out of the mountains, next to the Plateau river which widened alongside us. By midmorning, the clouds had burned away and the sky was a cold, autumn blue. We trod through a large meadow of short grass and daisies, dotted here and there by old stout oaks. The old man had been quiet all morning. I asked him who he'd shot at the pass.

He didn't say anything for a bit but then, after a series of croaking coughs, he stopped his horse, turned to me and took off his hat. He turned his head to the side and showed me where someone had done a mighty poor job cutting his gray-streaked hair. There was a big patch of it missing right behind his left ear.

"I just wanted to look the gentleman on my last trip to Bull. Just wanted to look decent but that sonovabitch barber in Char done me wrong."

He sat there with a strangely familiar, defiant look in his eye, maybe waiting for me to question what he'd said. I didn't. He spat, put his hat back, and we rode on. Crazy old coot.

By late afternoon the wind had picked up, howling along the plain, and the old man sat slumped in his saddle as his

horse trudged along. I rode up alongside, grabbed the reins and stopped. I picked the crazy old man off his mare and lay him under the boughs of an oak. I unsaddled the horses, got a fire going and lay down as well. The air was cold but next to the small blaze it wasn't so bad. I leaned on my saddle and fingered the locket I'd carried for so long. The gold glimmered just a little in the firelight. Alone it seemed in the shadow of the gnarled oak. The codger wheezed painfully in his stupor, so loud that all I could do was lay there in a daze, staring at the dimming undersides of the autumn-roasted, burnt-red leaves.

She laughed clear and high with a pretty smile, sitting there across the table from me. Still, I could barely hear her over the commotion outside. The town was cheering the arrival of the first train to Bull.

"Let's go to the window," I said and took her hand.

Outside were banners and streamers of rainbow colors, a crowd of people in their Sunday bests, and a black, sooty locomotive smoking and steaming next to the new station.

"The first of those machines from the East," she said somberly.

"And one day all the way to the bay."

We looked down at the crowd and saw that folks were getting antsy. Men were approaching the engine, curious. Some walked around it. One man even got on the machine and

rapped on the blackened windows of the engineer's compartment.

"What is he doing?" she asked as the sunlight through the open window basked her amber face.

"They want to see the drivers. the engineers, but they don't come out. . . . They're from East of the river."

"Land of the Dead," she said.

"Yes," and I recalled when I could ride for days on that side, among the living, something she could not remember. I turned away from the window. But then, then I had that old feeling. The back of my neck began to prickle.

"Pen," I said, "is there a man walking this way?"

I didn't want to look out and be seen.

"What?" she asked, "Why don't you look?"

I went back to the table and sat down. "Pen, who's walking to the restaurant?"

The waiter, bringing coffee and Alexander's cornmeal muffins, stopped about a dozen feet behind me. Pen looked back out the window and spoke. "It's a big man, walking up." She looked back at me then out the window again and continued, "He's chewing on a cigar. He has long brown moustaches and a big, gold belt buckle. He's coming here." She turned around and walked back to the table. I heard the waiter go back into the kitchen and then heard heavy footsteps clomp up the stairs to the door.

He pushed through the door with confidence, carrying his girth in front of him like a weapon. He took his ten gallon hat off his big head and dropped it down onto an empty table.

"Afternoon," he said.

"What do you want, Baron?" I asked.

"I'm collecting."

"What?"

"Brother, there's a range war south at the Azul and I need you there. "

"Now's not a good time, Baron."

"Brother, you know you owe me. "

"Yes, but not now. "

"You reneging?" he asked.

He stared at me and I at him.

"You reneging?"

"No, Baron, no. . . . How soon?"

"Tomorrow," he said.

I looked down then over to Pen.

Baron turned and grabbed his hat.

"I'll see you sunup, at the livery," he said, walking out.

Pen sat and looked at me.

Wolves' howls blew through the old man's snoring. It was dark and I sat up startled, jolted out of my memories, and for a moment unsure of where I was. The fire had dissipated

to glowing embers and the old man lay next to it, closer than I remembered.

I stood up to gather some wood and a bullet whizzed by, smacking into the tree. I dove to the ground and the old man stirred and cursed.

"Don't get up," I hissed.

"Who is it?" he mumbled, "That bounty hunter?"

I didn't have the old feeling.

"I don't think so."

Whoever it was must've been very close to see me stand there in the dark, I figured. The embers just didn't give off that much light. I lay still for a while and the old man did as well.

After maybe three minutes I heard boots scuffing in the dirt just past an oak that stood fifteen yards east of us. I drew my revolver and heard the old man do so as well. Then, he coughed.

A figure stepped out from behind that oak and aimed. In a blink, I shot him and saw him fall as another bullet blasted in. I heard the old man squirm and moan and then I saw another man laying belly down on the grass a dozen or so feet to the right of the man I'd just shot. He was cocking a rifle. I fired twice at him, the first shot blowing his hat off. The second was somewhat lower.

Three gun blasts then sounded from maybe a mile off, eastward. Must be some signaling. I hastened to the old man and saw that he was indeed shot, but still alive.

"The law," he said.

"Yes, somehow they tracked you. Or maybe they were close enough to hear the shooting yesterday."

I got up, unhobbled his horse, and slapped it hard on the rump with my gun butt. It bolted southward. Next, I saddled up Olive, heaved the old man on her and got on myself.

"Come on, Olive," I said and she got us going fast, due west.

The old man was very quiet, bleeding there all over my lap, saddle, horse. We rode hard through the dark, on the grass, under the stars. I could barely hear men back at our camp. Once light came, if they didn't go for the diversion, I knew they could catch us. Olive was a hell of a ride but she was weighted down. Her breathing was loud and heavy and her neck was wet with sweat.

As I rode, I wondered why I was doing this. He was only a crazy old murderer. And I an older one. Affinity for my kind? No, never that. He wasn't mine and beside that, this wasn't the business at hand. I thought of the locket and the picture of the woman inside of it, the mother of my child. That was mine. I must get back to that. Didn't need no distractions.

But this here had become more than a distraction. I couldn't even get across the river now; it was too big and fast.

I pushed Olive harder and we rode on alongside the river. Men were behind me, no more than a mile and so now was the sun, its scalp just poking over the eastern horizon.

I scanned ahead and the country was flat. Perhaps half a mile though, next to the water, I saw a hut. I guided Olive closer to the river and we raced along its north bank, heading for the shelter.

The light was just enough so that I could see that the hut had a thatched roof, and on this side of it, sat a rider, facing me. Olive took me to the shelter and to the rider and as she did, my neck grew slick with sweat.

As we approached, the hunter looked at me with cold eyes and a new scar on each cheek. I wondered how many teeth I'd knocked out with that shot. His big gray impatiently pawed at the ground though he sat calmly, hands in his lap. To his right, down in the river, I saw a rowboat tied to a peg stuck into the ground. I pulled Olive to a stop 'bout ten paces from the hunter and dismounted. He looked at me as I took the old man off Olive and carried him down to the boat.

"That one was mine," he said, nodding at the old man.

I didn't answer. I lay the old man gently in the boat and he looked up at me, still alive. That old man, who was he? He looked so much like a child, so much in the eyes like . . . I, I don't know. I turned from him, walked to the peg, and cut the rope. The boat slowly drifted off. And a faint feeling went with him, a feeling like that of kindred tainted by death. I

watched for a few moments as the old man floated down the river. A horse appeared on the south bank; it trotted along, following the aimless boat. His damn roan--lot of good she did us. I walked back to Olive and got on.

"I curse you for what you've done," the hunter said to me.

A great flush of heat welled up inside me.

"Yeah, I know"

I started off, due north this time.

"And now you've got their law after you, " he shouted, entertained with himself. Yeah, he started laughing deep and loud and I could hear it until the full light of dawn opened up the meadows ahead.

3 The Curse

I rode Olive hard throughout the morning. Under crystal blue skies she galloped, and I was displeased to see our pursuers not far behind. My northern swing had gained us little ground. He must've told 'em the way. They'd lost no time finding our tracks turn in the hazy light before dawn. He must've told. The diversion of the old man's horse hadn't worked at all, either. That old man'd said she would always come back to him. But the hunter must have pointed 'em my way.

I'd never liked him. Sure, now he had reason to wrong me, but of all my kin, he's been the one I've liked least. He's always enjoyed what he does. And now, he'd cursed me.

The land began to rise. We climbed the foothills that surrounded the mountains. Due north, my path intersected a hogback of the Black Ridge. We cut over it, slow and steady. Back in the valley I saw 'bout a dozen riders following. I did not want to get all shot to hell; I prodded Olive onward and leaned forward, hell-bent and mad.

Olive took me up through the pines and there I guided her farther up the slope, deep into the highlands through chutes in the rimrock. She trod upon scree and slush, making deep, easy tracks I knew. She trod so for hours, higher and higher into the mountains. By noon, she plunged into hoof-deep snow. It was cold and our breath blew out like bay fog. Olive,

her breath sputtering through icy-black nostrils, was tired, with me on her back, so I didn't ride her long past noon. Soon, we came upon a great, two-trunked pine. I had Olive take me to it and just below its lowest bough, I stood in the stirrups and took up the saddlebags behind me. These I swung up to the branch and let hang there.

I sat back down, patted Olive's sweat-soaked neck, then reached up again and pulled myself into the tree. Olive stood below for a few moments.

--Go, I told her. See if you can lose 'em.

--I will.

With that, she burst off, heading due west. I grabbed the saddlebags once more and with 'em, clambered on up the pine.

It took a good while to get to where I could no longer see the ground. Wary I might fall, I slung the saddlebags over my shoulder and climbed good and cautious, like a fat, brown bear. I took care not to send too much snow piling below, 'round the base of the pine. That'd be a sure sign. I shimmied up close to one trunk where little, if any snow clung to the living wood.

I was holding the tree like a woman, trunk to trunk, my arms wrapped 'round her, her branches like arms below mine, when I heard the horses. I heard hooves, thudding on the snow-covered ground, coming at length to the tree. Then I heard voices, far below.

". . . must be getting tired," a man said.

"I know mine is," another man said, "It looks like the tracks head west from here, though, and that's back down the mountain."

A gruff voice spoke, "That's if he keeps on that way. Here, it looks like he stopped."

"You reckon he can keep on much longer, Marshal?" the first man asked.

The gruff voice replied, "I suppose yes. Goddamn, that old man shot one in Char, two of ours by The Plateau, and is still goin'. I won't hold nothing past him."

At this time, a big raven flew into the tree, landing on a branch 'bout two yards to my right. It began to caw.

I heard another voice down below, further off, "Jeremy, toss me some a that grub. "

"Hell no!" yet another voice answered, then, "Marshal, I don't know how much more these horses can take."

"Yeah, Marshal, my Gus"

And I could not hear the rest of what he said over all the cawing. I motioned to the bird, trying to scare it. It did not move. It stopped, though, and looked at me, its small black head tilted to the side, beak up.

"What, you daisies wanna go back?" the marshal bellowed, "I don't ride with no yellers."

A chorus of "no's" responded, followed by a voice softened by distance.

"I don't want to go back to where that gray rider was. D'ya see how shot-up his face was? Gave me the willies. Born under a bad moon, that one."

I thought I heard someone say "shut-up" but was unsure because the big, black bird was cawing again. I tried to reach out and knock it away but it was just out of reach. It looked at me, cawed, bobbed its head, then cawed some more.

"Durn, that bird is loud!" I heard one of the voices curse below.

No, no. I don't need this.

"Right outta there, it sounds."

"Somebody shoot it," the marshal said.

"Can't see it, Marshal," the second man said.

Desperate now, I shook the branch. Damn, leave bird.

It didn't. Were it human, it would've been laughing.

Whatever it was, whoever it was, it cawed on, louder.

"Somebody shoot that damn bird," the marshal said, laughing.

I heard a gun click. My heart twisted in my chest. It would only take one shot. One shot.

"I can't see a thing, Marshal."

The raven cawed on.

"Just shoot and we'll ride on outta here."

Just one shot, it would take.

What sounded like one big blast rang out. The bird was blown off the branch and it fell, crashing through the ones

below. I heard the men cheer. I reached down and felt the bullet embedded into the underside of the branch on which I sat. With it still smoking, I holstered my revolver.

I wanted to get down from that tree right quick but it took 'em awhile to head off. Maybe it just seemed that way. I had no affection for being treed, nor for all the accolades they piled on the one fellow for the shooting of the raven. Not that I wasn't glad it was dead. Nah, I was glad of that. I was also glad I wasn't half as miserable a shot as that fellow below. Hell, I just wanted 'em to take their party away from me so I could get on down.

When they did finally move on, I climbed down, tossing the saddlebags to the ground to make it easier. From the lowest branch, I jumped down myself, and my legs were stiff and cold. The bird lay dead at my feet. I began to walk due south, wondering how much time I had.

It was cold in those mountains and it was snowing. It seemed to get dark very early. I walked among the trees for hours with a wool blanket I got out from the saddlebags, wrapped 'round my shoulders. By late evening, the snow was up to my calves. I walked on, south, downhill, wishing I were somewhere else.

My feet were cold. The wet snow had soaked through my boots. My trousers, up to my knees, were wet as well. This night the snow was falling both in the high country and the lowlands.

The forest had few sounds. Once, I heard the hollow call of an owl. Mostly there was just eerie, cold, damp silence floating about as I trudged through the snow. That is, until deep into the night when I heard the howling of wolves. They were not far off.

The proximity of these beasts reminded me that I had four empty chambers in my sidearm. Funny what will do that. I walked, putting in more cartridges along the way and when there were six in, I didn't bother to holster the weapon. It felt good in my hand. Cold, even through the glove, but good.

A healthy man shouldn't have reason to fear wolves, but never before had I felt so cold. The howls came again, four canine wails, closer this time, like ice breath blowing down on me. They were closing in. Soon, I heard sounds from 'em other than howls. I heard low barks, some growls. They were close.

I walked on, stepping deep into the snow, winding my way down the slope, among jet black trunks in the dark. I heard movement behind me, up the hill a little ways but I didn't want to turn around. Not yet. I took one more step, a leap down where part of the hill had broken away. It formed a small cliff wall, 'bout six feet high, perhaps ten feet wide. I landed in the snow with my back to the wall, then backed myself into it, waiting.

Something came crashing in the snow, footsteps thudding into the hillside, sinking heavily through its cold blanket. They

were coming down the hill, above me. I spun the revolver's chamber, suddenly unafraid. There wouldn't be more than six.

The crashing came closer, quickly, until it was right above me and I felt I had to duck. A huge form jumped off the short cliff and I felt the wind as it leaped by. It landed in front of me and, in an instant, reared on its hind legs, letting out that kind of call only a horse can release. I scrambled towards Olive and jumped onto the saddle. She whinnied once more, turned, and we raced down the decline. I looked back and saw several figures loping through the trees. They moved like shadows--rushing ghosts in the forest. Olive galloped hard and we flew down the mountain. I counted the wolves behind us. Too many.

Wolves had never been one of my greatest fears; nah, never met any man other'n a rancher or a city dweller with much to say about 'em, one way or another. But then, never before had I had their yellow-eyed ilk outnumber me more than six to one. I had it now.

I slapped Olive hard on her haunches and looked back once more. --Can you make it? I asked. They were full bore upon us, maybe ten yards back.

I stroked Olive's mane and leaned forward a bit. Branches were rushing by, slapping. --I don't know. They're fast. Olive responded.

--Come on, a good horse can outrun a wolf.

--Don't call me that.

--Sorry.

--Moreover, they're not wolves.

--What?

--Look again.

I looked back at the wolves but could not tell if they'd gained any ground.

--Look closely.

Holding onto the pommel of the saddle, I craned back to catch a good look at the beasts. Seven, eight, ten, twelve, *thirteen* big, suddenly silent wolves were running after us, gaining. They moved quickly, gliding almost, through the forest which was quiet now but for the sound of Olive's hooves smashing into the snow. What did she mean? She galloped on, crashing through bushes, thickets, all sorts of thorny walls. Long-armed flora--jagged, green, red, and yellow fingered--clawed at me; I lost my hat, but held on. Snow sprayed out from Olive's hooves as she raced.

--Look.

Behind us they were smoothly, effortlessly gaining ground. I couldn't see--wait. I saw Olive's hooves kicking up snow and heard her thumping through it, but I didn't hear much else. A low, weird growl came from the closest wolves, now but a half-dozen yards back. Hell, they were fast. How did they run so through this snow? Then I noticed they were not running through the snow. Their paws did not touch even

the topmost layer, let alone sink through to the ground. They were loping on air.

I fired three quick shots.

--Come on, Olive.

The locket that hung from my neck beat against my chest with every pounding step Olive took. Why had I wasted so much time in the back country? Would I now pay for it? We raced down into the valley. Olive galloped, snorting through the trees, and I turned back once more and took aim. One blast, two, and two wolves spun back, strange, green licks of fire splashing out from their wounds. I counted the number left. Nine, it appeared. I'd missed a shot in that first volley.

Now, though, they were on us. I could see their teeth and eyes, yellow as the autumn moon. One lunged for me and I followed its throat with my gun. It surprised me though, with a sudden leap upon me, its paws ripping into the side of my right thigh. I thrust the barrel in its muzzle as it scrambled up and I pulled the trigger. Green fire blazed and my hand was seared with pain. With a deafening, rageful howl, the beast flipped backwards, falling out of sight.

Before I could recover, another was upon me from my left. Steely jaws bit into my boot, teeth sinking through leather, then they let go as the wolf bounded higher up, stabbing its teeth into my calf. Bellowing in pain, I groped frantically for the carbine, yanked the gun clear of its scabbard, and swung it

down on the beast to my left. It tore through the flesh of my leg as I clubbed it hard, knocking it tumbling away.

Two more beasts lunged, but Olive brained one with a rear hoof and I, with the carbine, blew another away in a green blast. And still more came. Holding on whiteknuckle tight to the pommel of the saddle, I cocked and fired again and again with my right hand, shooting behind us and shooting poorly. A good half-dozen still breathed down on us as Olive sprinted through the now sparse, thinning pines.

Three closed in, preparing to lunge, and I could see green froth dripping from their jowls. We raced out, through the brim of the forest into a great clearing. Star and moonlight shone down on us, painting violent, contorting shadows on the grassy ground. Those of the wolves were hectic and menacing. I watched their shadows dancing around us as they followed, closing in with the moon behind 'em.

Soon though, the shadows altered, transformed in a way I could not make out in the moonlight. I looked back up at the shrinking beasts themselves. Flapping and cawing, these strange creatures no longer wore fur but now flew garbed in black feathers. Six foul ravens flew behind us. I shot again, destroying one in a nasty burst of feathers and dispersing the others in a noisy, chaotic swarm.

Olive galloped on awhile until I eased her to a stop there in the center of the clearing, knowing she was tired.

--Birds? She asked.

--His. I'm cursed.

--Yes, and then, so am I.

We looked back to the edge of the forest and saw a rider carefully weave out from the pines. He came a horse length into the clearing holding something in his hand. I leaned forward, looking, and thought I saw what it was. In case I hadn't, he held it up so I could. It was a hat he held, though he had one himself, on his head. I thought I saw him smile. I patted Olive and she began to trot. We moved on, pursued this time by a familiar, whistled tune echoing softly across the glade.

Place was greatest. His were the only ears that could hear our mother's voice, so he'd lead us to water. He'd crouch at the stream bank rolling clay in his fingers while we drank.

But our youngest brother--he was always the most terrible among us, the worst among dry, high-desert kin. Even when we were small--so long ago, when the land was hot and new. I remember the meadow we found, when we walked before any fields were plowed, before men fenced in livestock and acreage. There in that meadow we saw that which we had never seen before. He didn't see it first--Scout did--but he wanted it more than any of the rest of us. It was big, beautiful, and the color of stone.

But the magnificent creature wouldn't have him; it would snort and move off, sometimes even charge him, though he

would not flee--only glower. It took to Scout and to me and to Place, but Place would only talk with it about our mother. Scout and I asked if we could get on its back. It nickered and stamped, but it granted us our wish.

Its coat was as blue and gray and as smooth as marble. We had never moved so fast and soon we became afraid. I fell off and Scout was thrown. Horse laughed at us and trotted back around to allow us on once more. We didn't know that our gray, pale brother lay watching.

When the night came and Baron laid camp, while Coyote danced, and Predicador--before he became Padre--told parables, we heard a loud scream in the dark. "It is Horse," Place said, and we ran that way on the meadow.

Baron brought fire because he could not see in the moonlight. But even he could hear the screams of Horse. We came to where they stood and saw our gray brother with ropes in his hands, the ends of which wrapped around Horse's neck. He tugged and tugged. Though Horse was too strong, our brother would not give up. That was not his way. We called to him, his brothers, asking him to stop. But brother Death would not.

I ran to him and knocked him down. He got up, still clutching the ropes. I struck him once more, and reached for the ropes myself. At this, I saw my brother's eyes blaze. He ran from me, ran toward giant Horse. He ran under Horse, finally dropping the ropes. But then, my brother reached out.

Horse shrieked again, louder this time, a bloody, painful, piercing howl. Horse's marble thews quivered, its head shook, and its eyes bulged out white and afraid. We fell to our knees screaming, "No!" as our brother, gray and mean, gelded Horse.

Moonlight evaporated from his coat like water off a sunbaked rock. Then, Death jumped on and rode away.

In the morning we heard the stream and Place crying. On the bank he rolled clay worms in his fingers. He set them down to warm in the sun and watched them wriggle and burrow. Where his tears fell to the clay, brown mice sprang up and ran, scurrying to the meadow.

I saw the shadow of Horse in the distance and ran to it. Horse stood silent. My brother stared at me and I at him. In the heat he stepped down and reached for my loins. This time I ran, passing Coyote who laughed in my dust.

We were together then, some of us hating each other as we learned our ways.

4 Char Pass

Olive had succeeded in losing the posse the afternoon I spent treed, so I had little fear of pursuit as I rode to Char. Though I knew it was possible they could find her tracks, or maybe had already, I felt I had enough of a lead to make it to the town at least one day ahead of 'em. Once there, I figured I'd be safe. They couldn't track me in a town full of horses and since they'd never seen my face, they wouldn't recognize me on the street. It was too late for 'em now to draw the connection between myself and that old man who had floated down the Plateau, only minutes ahead of 'em. My brother, in his anger, had ended up aiding his prey when he'd steered the hunters my way instead of the old man's.

That old man had cost me some time, though it wasn't his fault. I'd just spent two years looking for Pen in the north country, far west where the firs grew tall. Fruitless, I'd wandered back east, meandering my way to Char Pass. The old man had distracted me, first by trying to shoot me.

Now, though, I was through with all that. The locket that hung from my neck reminded me of what I needed to do and Olive took me along, through the snow and wind to the place where I'd do it, where I'd begin to look again. Anyone who went east or west was bound to go through Char. Even the dead, in their machines, chose this route.

Soon it would be suicide to travel through the mountains; in the bitter cold, blood had crusted and froze on my torn trousers. All 'round, ice clung to pine needles, making small, clear fingers, and the ground crunched below: brittle, cracking glass. I didn't come down to where the tracks ran until I was but a day out of Char. From there, I rode parallel to the rails, south of 'em a couple hundred yards, Olive scuffing through dry, shallow snow. The sky was a cold, cloudless, fading blue and Olive veered into the town as twilight began draping shadows from the peaks down to the boardwalks.

Aside the station, where malformed icicles clung to the eaves like bats, sat the train, all black and sooty, its grill pointing east. The engineer's booth was blocked off so you couldn't see in. Even its windows were blackened. The city-stench of machines hovered about it, that of sulfur and tar. Two coaches and two freight cars were parked behind the engine, and a blood red caboose sat behind 'em.

I rode over the tracks and down the lane, between the post office and the station, and took Olive to the livery. Wade Bent wasn't there. A thin, dirty boy, maybe twelve, with one eye and a heavy, oversized woolen poncho, approached me as I dismounted, my legs feeling like rusted hinges. He took the reins and I saw he was staring at my wounds. I gave him a silver and showed him the locket.

"She been through here?"

He brought it close to his good eye and shook his head. I then put the pendant back under my shirt and walked off as he led Olive into the stable. Olive was silent and my footsteps crunched through the shallow snow. I walked past the boarded-up barber shop towards the Whisky Bucket, stepped onto the boardwalk, and heard a few voices inside, in between the deep, hollow sounds my heels made on the planks. I passed the saloon and turned right, into Fat Nelly's. The thin man, I remembered, Vernon, stood at the desk and a weak fire trembled in the hearth to his left.

"Evening ."

" Evening, Sir . "

He didn't recognize me.

"I'd like a room for the night."

"Yes, of course." and he pulled out a book from under the desk, "That'll be two bits. Sign here."

I gave him the coin and scrawled my X in the book. "I'd be much obliged if you'd have a bath brought up."

"Right away," he said as he put the book back under.

I brought out the locket and opened it. "You seen this woman?" I asked.

He bent over, fumbling for some spectacles in his pocket. Impatient, I looked around, caught sight of a buck's rack mounted above the hearth. He looked closely, spoke. "Your--?"

I saw the antlers, sprawling, jagged, "Sister," I lied.

He was quiet awhile, looking. Finally, "I don't know. Just couldn't say."

I tucked the locket back under my shirt, got the key, and took my gear upstairs. The room had a window that looked north, out of town. It was getting dark and the wind had picked up. Snow blew along the ground, the wind whipping it into the night. A ways off, I could hear a piano begin to play. Then, a knock on my door.

I walked over and opened it. A small girl stood there looking up with Fat Nelly's hazel eyes. An enormous, empty basin sat between herself and my door. I looked at it and she picked it up, then tried to carry it through the doorway. I helped, turning it sideways, but it wouldn't pull through.

"It's Fat Nelly's," the girl said.

"Yes. I see. You got another?"

"Uh huh," and she grabbed it, spun, and trotted off.

I walked to the bed and laid out some clean clothes from my pack. I found some matches and lit the lamp on the night stand. I sat on the bed for awhile, waiting, listening to my stomach growl.

The dog had been jealous at first and sometimes we could hardly hear the baby's cries over all that yipping. I had a notion to shoot the hound one night but Pen said it would pass, and it did. One morning, that same day I noticed the boy had

his mother's eyes, I got up to start the morning fire. I stopped to check on the boy and saw him asleep, wrapped warm and curled in his cradle. The dog crouched at the foot of the cradle, growling. I stooped to look. It was a rat, not real big, and the dog stood between it and the cradle. The rodent stopped, looked at the dog, then scurried away. The dog stopped its growling and lay back down.

The girl came back into the room quiet as a cat, holding a smaller basin, a large pail, really, half-full of steaming water. She set it down with a thud, splashing some of the water over the rim.

"That was quick," I said.

"Already had the water boiling," she said like a child in a hurry, tossing me a towel, and shutting the door on her way out.

I took off my clothes and did my best to get clean. My wounds were deep but the water was hot and she'd dropped soap and a rag on the floor next to the tub. I was able to clean 'em out, as well as scrub some of my stained clothing. I toweled off and changed into some different duds.

My coat was thick and heavy, but outside was gripping cold. I walked along the boardwalk, going to where the music played. The saloon was picking up and I stepped in. It was bright. The music was loud and shrill. Dozens of people,

mostly men, sat drinking, eating, shuffling, dealing. Voices sprayed and rolled together like surf. The heavy, warm scent of grilling meat flowed into my nostrils as I let go of the swinging doors behind me. I breathed it in and walked to the bar.

When I sat on a stool, though, something else hit me. A cold prickle crept up my nape. I turned around, looked. A man in a striped shirt played the piano. He was new. Three saloon girls--plumages of red, yellow, shiny black-- descended the stairs. They didn't look familiar. Men sat at tables, with beer mugs and shot glasses, flicking cards. One game broke into an argument, a man motioning at the wall. I looked all around, but saw no kin.

A cough came from behind the bar.

"What'll it be?" It was Frank.

"You tell me," I said.

"What, mister? Ho, wait just a minute. Is that you?"

"No one else."

"It's been a while, a good while." And he laughed a bit and rubbed some sweat off his glistening face, up into coarse, graying blonde hair. "Rye?" he asked.

"Bottle. "

He set one down with two shot glasses, poured twice, threw one down, smiled, and said, "On the house." I thanked him and tossed one back myself. He stepped aside for a moment to get a couple mugs of beer for two guys down the

bar, then came back. "Still huntin'?" he asked. He'd always thought I hunted for bounty, remembering only that whenever I came in, I was looking for someone, not remembering that it was always a woman, always the same woman.

"So to speak," I said and showed him the open locket, "Seen her?"

I gather he thought the locket was my own perverse eccentricity. "She's a pretty one. What she do?"

I poured two more shots. She'd done nothing wrong, of course; I was the one who'd wandered. "Stabbed a suitor with a knittin' needle," I replied, hoping.

There was some shouting coming from the broken card game. Frank looked over, then back at the locket. "You know, I might have, but I sure can't think of when. Long time ago, maybe."

The argument was getting louder. A man's voice was complaining loudly 'bout the mirror on the wall. Frank was now looking over.

"You excuse me for a moment, will you? Tell Bessy what you'd like to eat for supper."

I wasn't encouraged by what he said 'bout the picture in the locket. It was 'bout the same thing he'd said the last two times I'd been through Char. He walked down the bar passing and speaking quickly to a cow-eyed woman in red, who approached and leaned on the bartop.

"That one for me?" she asked.

"Sure," and I handed her the second shot while I downed the first. She was new, though I gathered she'd been here for a little while. I asked her 'bout some of the other gals. She only knew a few I knew, and they had married off to cattle ranchers. Would I want to be married for an evening? No, I was just a traveling man looking for his sister. Your sister? Yes, ma'am, my sister. She don't look like you. No, she takes after my pap, and I look like my mama. No, I ain't seen her but I'll sure keep my eye out. I'd be much obliged. Frank says you're hungry? Yes, I am. I'll go tell Jimmy to cook you a plate. Jimmy still here? Sure is.

And she stepped off into the kitchen.

I poured another drink, sipped, and scanned the room. More folks had straddled in. I saw Frank taking the mirror down off the wall, his swollen face red with anger. He set it down behind where the man played piano.

I saw the man who had complained, looking after Frank. He was tall, well-dressed, with black hair and no gunbelt. He sat back down to the game, a smug look on his face.

Frank came back to the bar, muttering. I poured him a shot and he drank it. "Son of a bitch," he said as he set the glass down, "That son of a bitch says I don't know how to run no establishment."

"What did he say?"

"Son of a bitch. Hell, he says no self-respectin' gambler would play anywhere there's a mirror on the wall. Says the others use it to cheat."

"It looked pretty far off the table for that."

"That's what I said but he was festerin' about it so I gave in."

I looked over at the man and saw him place his bet. He had a satisfied, tight-lipped smile. His hands were large, very pale, and he held his cards funny: index finger and thumb splayed like a child playing cowboy.

Then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Bessy and she set the plate down in front of me. I thanked her. Pork stew, it was, with potatoes and carrots, also some bread. I inhaled it and drank my whisky. Now and again Frank would stop and talk a bit, as would Bessy or one of the other women. I didn't get their names as my head was getting waterlogged with drink. I showed 'em the locket, had the usual lack of luck, and after awhile had my fill of food, talk, and whisky. I got up and walked among the tables, wondering why I had the old feeling on the back of my neck again.

Some of the gamblers--Jacks all--gave me hard looks, with me walking between tables, but I didn't care too much if I offended any of 'em. I was just looking for a game to sit in. There were an even ten tables and I must've walked past each one twice before I found an empty chair.

I sat in with four men--call'em Jack Diamond, Jack Heart, Club, Spade--who seemed pleased for the opportunity to take money from a drunken man. At least, I figure that's how I appeared, as that's how I felt, and that's how I played, misfiring pairs of tens, nines--lost even on aces and eights. They looted my pockets for four or five hands but then what went around, came back. Came back good. The money shone in the barlight, glinting in my eyes as I cupped it chinkling towards me. But the whisky'd kissed me hard. My head ached like I'd been kicked by a horse. I decided I'd had enough, had now won enough, so I gathered the money and stood up.

"Gentlemen, goodnight."

They looked more than a little surprised. One, a bearish sort with yellow-gray eyes and a V-shaped jaw--best call him Spade--spoke testily, "You're gonna give us a chance to win our money back, right?"

I suppose it was abrupt, but I had won little of their money, "No," I said, and began to leave.

He stood up, reached out, and grabbed my collar.

"Why don't you sit a few more hands, mister."

And one of the other Jacks nodded, toe-head hair flapping above his brow. The other two just sat, looking tense.

"Why don't you let go of me, boy," I said.

Spade looked in his mid-twenties, a few years younger than I do. He jerked my collar, said, "What did you call me?"

Now, I'd had some drink, and I gathered, so had he. Still, I held my temper in check. Until, he jerked my collar once more. This time, I felt something snap 'round my neck, then slide and fall. I felt rage well up within me.

I screamed out something ugly 'bout his legitimacy, and my fist flew out as well, striking him hard, too hard in the jaw. His head spun around with an awful crack and his body went with it, crashing hard and loud onto the next table, five or six feet back. People scattered and the table tipped over. I looked at the men at my table but they were looking at the man I had struck. He was not getting up.

I looked down, and crouched low. My eyes hazy, I didn't see it right away. I cursed as I looked for it. Bessy came over, leaned down and gently picked it off the floor.

"Here it is. Now, you better go."

I took it from her and stood up. It seemed everyone was staring at me. I heard Frank curse and I went out through the swinging doors into the dark air chill.

I found myself lumbering off the boardwalk into the street. I walked down, past the livery toward the tracks. I heard the piano start again behind me, only now realizing that it had stopped at all, and I felt the cold bite into my neck where the chain usually lay. I walked until I came to the rails. There, I sat down upon the cold steel. The wind howled and small bits of snow stung my face and hands. I sat there and tried to fix the locket chain.

As I did, the old feeling licked the back of my neck. I stopped fiddling and put the locket in my shirt pocket. I looked around, saw nothing, thought, hell, I don't want to deal with one of my brothers. Not now. I stood up and felt the blood rush out of my head. I looked all around, drew my sidearm. Nada.

I didn't see a thing but I heard movement in the train. I walked over to the engine, but the feeling began to subside. I looked all around but saw no one at all. Then, more noises from the train engine. I turned back, angry, and walked closer to it, riled, frustrated. I heard the engineers inside, some clinking and shuffling. I aimed at the window and fired. Some mad shuffling inside ensued. I fired again, blasting a second, jagged hole in the glass, and I heard myself laughing. I walked closer, listening to the frantic movement inside.

I started to climb onto the engine, to peer inside the holes I'd shot into the black glass, but I stopped. A hand poked through one of the holes, holding a rag or a handkerchief. It looked as though it was trying to plug the hole but the rag had fallen out onto a lip just below the window. I saw the hand reach out, groping for it, and saw that it was bone white. No, not bone white, just bone. A hand without flesh grabbed the rag and pulled it back, plugging the hole. Then, another rag plugged the second. I took a step back and looked at the two rag-plugged holes. Then, I heard some clicks behind me.

I spun around, shooting thrice from the hip. Three men, who stood between myself and the post office, had three hats blown off their heads, one along with a cry of pain. Drunken judgment, I did the wrong thing: talked. "Who the hell are you?"

And for a reply, I heard a gun sing and felt a bullet kiss deep, hard, and hot into my shoulder. I went down, onto my butt, with my legs straight out in the snow. A voice called out, "Drop your gun. Toss it!"

I did. The three approached, hatless, one bleeding from a graze above his ear. He held a smoking gun and he looked angry.

"The law," he said as the two other men holstered their guns.

"The law's on posse," I said, watching him step closer.

"Not all of it," he said and I saw his gun swinging through the air, right at my head.

In the dark I woke up cold, on a hard bunk that hung from a wall by two chains. My head and my shoulder blazed with pain though they had been bandaged. I felt the wounds. It seemed they had been cleaned well, too.

I sat up, cursing, angry with myself. I sat in a jail cell. I stood up and walked over to the bars. None too solid. Nonetheless, I went back and sat on the bunk. Cold sober now, I was damn angry with myself. I felt for the locket, found it, and fumbled awhile, trying to fix the chain. Pinching the links

between thumb and finger, I got it together in about half an hour and then I lay down once more. Sleep took me and I dreamed and dreamed of all my damn brothers.

I awoke, not at all surprised, to the feeling that came when kin were close. No, maybe not quite the feeling, but similar. Third time tonight. I heard voices outside the jail house and then heard a man come in, sit down, and begin to count money. It was still dark. The feeling didn't last long.

Footsteps came to the room where my cell was, along with a glowing lantern. I saw the man I'd grazed above the ear; some light glimmered off a badge he wore that said Deputy. He held a piece of paper in his left hand and he spoke. "You lost your sister?"

That was the story this time. "Yeah. "

"You ought not to go raisin' hell every time you got family problems "

I didn't answer.

"A friend of yours bailed you out just now, paid the hundred dollars gold. I can let you go come daybreak, after you sleep off that whisky."

I looked at the piece of paper, thought of Frank. The deputy hung the lantern from a hook on a rafter and then handed me the folded paper.

He started to leave, stopped, said, "That man you hit is at Doc Brett's. Doc says he might not live. You better stay in town

'til the marshal comes back. If the man dies, you'll have some explaining to do, and if you're not around, the marshal will just reckon it was murder."

He looked at me for a moment then walked out. I sat down and put the chain back 'round my neck. I tucked the locket under my shirt then unfolded the paper and read. It went something like this:

Dear Sir,

I am writing to inform you that I may be able to help you with your problem. I could not help but observe, last night, you as you showed your locket and asked people if they'd seen the lovely woman pictured inside. Indeed, I waited impatiently for you to approach me, as I once observed, over another's shoulder, that the woman pictured is a lass I have certainly seen.

I know how it is to love a sister. The torment you feel must be immense. Bless your poor, red heart. If you could but wait for me until this evening . . . You see, I saw your sister riding just north of Bull, perhaps a week ago, and now, after I finish with some business in the day, I find that I need to return to that far town. We could book seats on the train and be there before morning, you and I. Once there, I'm sure I could show you where I saw her.

Please, I hope you are not offended by my

interference. I cannot bear the thought of a good man trapped behind bars. Mine is only to help my fellow man.

A Friend to Be,

Dugan Verlaine

I read the letter twice; thought it was strange enough. What did this Verlaine want with me? What he wrote was too much what I wanted to hear.

But I'd searched Bull thoroughly, years before, more than once. Been all around there. Up and down the west bank of the great river. It's where I started, and where I was last with her. Long time ago. I'd followed trails far west since then. Into mountains, bogs, salt pans. Could I now be close? Did it seem strange because this was a piece of good news, instead of bad?

This is how I often thought on this subject. I had lapses, spells when I got lost in my mind. Like going in circles down a whirlpool. Riddled only with failure for years, I'd no sure ideas, no faith I'd ever find her. Sometimes I didn't even think on it. Often just wandered.

I thought 'bout it this night until dawn. The way this man wrote. I couldn't trust such words. Why would a stranger pay \$100 to bail me out of jail? Lot of money, that. I thought of my kin and felt suspicious. There was the curse.

With the morning light came the deputy, who unlocked my cell as I was removing the bandages. He looked surprised.

"You might want to leave that on," he said. "That slug we pulled out was pretty deep."

"I heal fast," I said, buttoning my shirt.

I saw him stare at my forehead, where he'd bludgeoned me, and I asked him for my things. He gave 'em to me, along with some more warnings, and I think I surprised him with a sincere apology. His bandage was still on.

He followed me to the door and watched as I stepped out, into the sunshine. The sky was clear and the air brisk. The sharp, ice and granite peaks to the north and south of the town hovered proudly above it, basking in the sun.

I didn't cross the street to Fat Nelly's. Rather, I turned right and walked down the boardwalk. I felt the deputy's eyes on my back but I believe he thought I was going to check on that man at Doc Brett's, because I heard him go back inside the jail house. I didn't go to the doctor's, though. I stepped into Farley Supplies and bought myself a hat, more cartridges, and some trail rations. I'd decided to head out this morning. Saw no reason to wait for some silver-tongued fool. This Dugan Verlaine sounded like company I didn't need. With his information, true or untrue, I'd go search on my own.

I walked across the snow-covered street with my parcels, back to Fat Nelly's. There, I got my gear and then walked 'round the back way, behind the buildings with their tall

facades, to the livery stable. Wade Bent greeted me good morning and we shook hands. He complimented me on my horse, as always, and told me no, he ain't seen no pretty ladies pass through. I thanked him, saddled up Olive, and rode slowly on out of Char, past the station and alongside the tracks, going east.

I wasn't but two minutes out when I heard rushing footsteps behind me. It was the girl from Fat Nelly's running with a cloth sack in her arms. I had Olive stop.

"Big Mama packed you lunch," she panted, handing the sack to me.

I remembered when her grandmother was that age, smiled, and spoke, "You tell Fat Nelly I'm much obliged."

"Yessir," she said, and began to skip off.

"Wait," I said, "Why are you always in such a hurry?"

She giggled as she ran, shouted, "Life is short."

Bewildered, I shook my head and rode on.

5 Eastward

Olive took me down, out of the mountains. On the old Mountain Road, which meandered where the rails could not, we skirted canyons and wandered through aspen groves. Where the tracks ran over tressled bridges, high above deep, mountain stream gorges, we wound down the narrow, cliff-hugging trail. Olive clopped through clear, icy waters--streams that once boasted gold but that now had lost their claims to streams in the mountains of the far west. It was always better out west. Everything was. Heading west, you felt alive.

But I was heading east. Olive took me down, out of the snow and ice, out of the forests of pine, aspen, white birch, through glades of pink, violet, lemon, and white wildflowers, through those sweet, biting streams, down into the windblown, blue and buffalo grasses of the prairie. Here, the old road merged with the railway, so I rode alongside the tracks in the gray-brown dirt. Olive stepped in age-old wagon ruts--trails left from bygone days when the living and dreaming fled the dying. I saw bones here and there, half-buried and strewn among the clumps and tufts of prairie grass: cow bones, their skulls and horns, remnants of cattle-drives that still continue, though most now along the north-south Tipton Trail from Ciudad to Bull.

Here, the land was flat, stretching just so as far as you could see to the south, east, and north. Plains of grass for miles upon miles. Olive took me through it under gray cotton skies.

I rode for hours before I saw any traffic on the road. Harsh gales from the south were blasting along the prairie and I saw figures 'bout a half-mile off: two riders coming west. Olive took me through the raging wind towards the riders, one of whom dismounted to relieve himself. He did this on the south side of the road while his fellow rider went over, north of the tracks and just sat there in his saddle. I approached the pair at an easy gait. They were scraggy looking men, both wore two side arms and one man, darker than the other, with a thick, black mustache, wore bandoleers. He sat on his horse, waiting. The other finished his duty and turned 'round just as I was passing between 'em. I flipped my coat back to free my .45 as I greeted the man.

"Afternoon . "

He nodded but was smiling at his friend, Bandoleers, across the tracks.

"That's a nice mare," Bandoleers said.

I looked over at him, unhitching my sidearm as I did. The man on foot coughed a bit, but I rested my hand flat on my thigh. "I was admiring your horse," I said to Bandoleers.

He stared at me for awhile and I felt obliged to return the favor. The other man was moving to my right but I just looked at Bandoleers. Several moments, I suppose, passed .

"Few men worth the mounts they ride," I added.

He glared at me and the skin was taut over his cheek bones. Time passed and then a labored chuckle. A thoughtful look came to his eyes and he chewed his lip for a moment, then said something silly: "You know what time it is, stranger?"

"Don't carry a watch," I replied.

He nodded his head and spat down, the wind blowing the spittle above the gray brown dirt over to the grass. "Much obliged anyhow, " he said, looking right at me, and then he gently spurred his horse and trotted off.

I watched him go and saw the other follow. The second was speaking to Bandoleers, but I didn't hear the words. Didn't care to. The wind blew on as their figures gradually disappeared into the west.

Olive took me on eastward for a few more hours until dusk began to settle around us. As it did, we turned south of the rails a half mile or so and made camp. I unsaddled Olive and put together a small fire with the horse standing by. She looked at me.

--You don't want to eat? I asked.

--No pleasure in it.

--Why's that?

--Grass tastes like cow shit in these parts.

I got out a tin of beans, opened it and cooked it over the fire. Took a few swigs of water from my canteen and just sat and ate. Olive came closer.

--Did you see the bird that was following us all day? She asked me.

I hadn't.

--Black bird, like the others. Don't see it now but I believe it was there most of the day.

--Tell me if you see it again and I'll shoot it for you.

--Yes.

I spread out my bedroll and lay down with visions of these birds flying around in my head. The sky above was cloudy night. Soon, the wind had blown out the fire. I just lied there for a couple of hours. My body was sore but glad to be lying flat on the earth, not setting bent in a saddle. Small bits of turf and grit blew along the prairie but I fell asleep anyway, after a time.

It was the train that woke me. In the dark, I heard the chug-puff and clatter of it passing on, followed by the screeching of the wheels as it braked to a slow halt, perhaps a mile east of where I was camped. Why was it stopping there? I wondered, for there were no regular stops between Char Pass and Bull. I sat up, heard voices from the train, but it was too far off to catch the words. Someone was shouting over the sound of doors or windows closing. This went on for awhile. I watched dark clouds creep along in the sky. Soon I heard a slow grinding and then the squeaks and whine of the wheels turning slowly, laboring to move the train once again. I lay

back down. Flying through the night like bats, the screeching somehow lulled me back into my slumber.

I don't know if it was the cool splat of rain on my forehead, the violent, gusting wind, Olive's nervous neighing, or the tingling on the back of my neck that woke me, once again. I don't know which it was but it was that damn feeling I get, coupled with the rain, that made me jump up with a start. I stood up, almost dazed, and drew my gun. I looked around, waited. It was just before dawn. No one was near but I decided I'd better break camp anyway. Hastily, I gathered my things, threw 'em in the saddlebags, and saddled Olive. The sky was now spitting down on us some heavy, cold drops. I got on Olive just as a strange mist was blowing in from the north. Something akin to fear made me ride hard. Olive galloped due east through the rain and wind. It was dark and cold and her hooves slashed through the soaking grass.

The old feeling on my neck was strong, almost searing. I reached back, checking for my carbine as I rode. It was there in the scabbard. I jostled it a bit, making sure it was loose. Behind us a thick mist or cloud was rolling along the grass in our direction. Could it have changed course? You see, the wind was blowing from the south. Strong gusts were driving the raindrops northward while I rode Olive through slanted sheets of water. The mist, though, was coming on us fast, now right on Olive's tail. The spider-leg sensation crawled down my

back and up to my scalp. A strange, whispering sound slithered behind me.

--What in hell?

But no response came from Olive. Unnerved if not scared, she sprinted like that's where she came from.

If there's ever been a faster mount than Olive, I'd be surprised, though I don't believe it really mattered this night. She tore through the wet prairie with me on her back and something else, wet and cold, grasping at her hooves. I'd have drawn my gun but could think of nothing to do with it. My neck itched as if it had a rash. We raced to the eastern horizon.

Ahead I could see the vast expanse of plains but just beyond that I caught a hazy, red glow. Through the heavy, water-laden black clouds poked rosy fingered dawn. As a cold weight crept up my back, I saw the morning sun begin to rise. Just a glow behind the clouds, I swear I could feel its warmth. I heard myself start to laugh. I heard the sound of it, weird and hollow, through the fields. Morning glow loomed ahead and Olive panted furiously. Laughing, I looked back and knew. Though the rain still fell, the mist was dissipating. Before my eyes, I saw it sift apart and slowly evaporate, drifting back into what night remained.

Long after that, though, even into the full light of morning, Olive raced. I held on for the ride, perhaps lost in thought. A sort of anger, a dull ache, settled into my brow. I was beginning to truly rue the curse, to sense its magnitude. It

could rouse me from my sleep; chase me through the night. It took any form it chose and found me wherever I was. Worse, I began to see, it delivered fear. With this I was angry. I felt a tight knot of regret in my gut and a couple of old notions crept into my head: don't cross Death; don't cross kin.

Fatigue began to clutch Olive. She slowed to a trot and stepped wearily through the morning drizzle. I rode, waiting for the rain to stop. When it finally did, I had Olive stop as well. I climbed down and began to struggle with a fire. I put some coffee on and sat on the saddle on the ground, cursing while the timid flames licked the base of the kettle.

I'd kept that old buffalo gun for I don't know how many years, right above the mantle, next to her two silver candle holders. Pen had always thought it was the most ridiculous thing. No, impractical, she'd said, useless. What good is a gun you can't shoot, she'd asked, not waiting for an answer. No good. Don't want it in my house. When it came to things like that gun, the house was hers. If a trickle of water should run down the ceiling beams, or the stone foundation should settle to one side, the property quickly changed hands, however.

No sentimental value? she'd asked, or really, almost pleaded. She wanted one of my stories at least. But I never wanted to lie to her. I just told her the truth: it shoots.

And then that one time she took it to the gunsmith. Was she curious? Was it a favor? She claimed the latter, initially,

but returned victorious. The gun, she quoted him, is inoperative. He'd have to melt it down and make a new one before he could make this old thing work. The trigger is irreversibly jammed. It simply won't pull.

She stood there smiling, satisfied. Now will you tell me the story? she seemed to ask. I didn't, but I did.

I took the gun and her outside. I loaded the single shot and took aim at a fence post, fired. The bullet struck the wood with a thunk. Pen looked at me. The story is, I told her, that this gun is mine.

From then on, however, she wouldn't let me keep it above the hearth. Said she never thought it could shoot in the first place, or she wouldn't have allowed it there for so long.

I knew when I was beat.

I sat 'round camp all morning. Dozed a little, despite the coffee, with my head on my knees. The grass was still wet, though the sun was free now between parted, sparse clouds. Olive was busy grazing, the grass now duly cleansed by the nighttime downpour. I got out my guns and took 'em apart. I cleaned, oiled, and loaded 'em. Ammunition for the carbine was running low. In Char I'd only bought rounds for the revolver, so I'd have to pick some more up in Bull. Seems it always comes in handy.

I saw the shadow while I was putting my last round in the carbine. It came from the west, gliding across the prairie

floor, and arced northward. Could've been there was a tree to perch on that way, but I didn't see one. It slid over my camp. I cocked and aimed the barrel up at the bird. It dove preternaturally, trying to escape a shot, but I had it. I followed it with the carbine and fired dead on. The bird fell to the ground. At that I had a chuckle.

I sat around for hours thinking 'bout Pen and what I'd do next. I planned to go to Bull, look around there for a day or two, then head north alongside the East River. I'd have to be careful to skirt the law in case that fellow in Char had died. I'd a feeling he'd done it, too.

Figuring it might prevent immediate recognition of me later in Bull, I got out my razor. I wet my face and began to shave, glancing now and again to the flat side of the straight edge at my reflection to check progress. The brown beard came off slowly and I cut myself up pretty well. Always do that. It's why I wear a beard. Don't have the time or inclination for vanity. So then I splashed more water on my face from the half empty canteen to rinse off the blood. I put the razor away, got out some jerky, and began to break camp as I gnawed.

When the hairs on my nape prickled and caught on my collar, I dropped belly-down, six-gun out. I'd grown that edgy. What now? I lay next to the dead fire, hidden somewhat by some nearby untrampled grass. Olive stood off to my right, in plain sight, head up, ears twitching. I thought I heard

something to the south and I pointed the revolver that way. Yes, there was some movement--the shifting sound of cord grass stepped on or pushed aside--but not in sync with the wind. Maybe only thirty, forty feet away; hell, that was close. I lay there under a gentle sun on damp grass, my outstretched arms slowly tiring but my eyes searching. I listened for any more movement. Olive was quiet, watching. A voice called out.

"Brother, you feel it?"

I lay surprised, trying to place the voice. It sounded familiar though a bit muffled. Silence. One minute, two.

"Brother, do you feel it?" the man spoke again. The voice was strong, deep, a bit insistent. It continued, "Now brother, if I would've wanted to I'da shot you while you were crouching there cuttin' up your face. Now, I didn't get a good look at it so you tell me which one you are."

He made sense. That close, anyone could have shot me down. Somehow, on a wide-open, flat-as-a-board plain, a man had snuck to within pistol range of me. Only one or two fellows I've ever known could do that.

"Nobody," I called out.

I heard laughter then saw a hat followed by a dark face and a broad, tall body rise out of the grass. He was even closer than I had thought. I stood up, brushed wet grass blades off my shirt and trousers, and holstered my gun. The back of my neck twitched as he approached and as, I know, his did the

same. I took his hand, big, callused, brown--called black--in mine. My kin. "Scout," I said, "long time."

"Yeah," he smiled, "You look a mess."

I crouched down, grabbed the jerky I'd dropped.

"Coffee?" I asked, "It's a bit cold."

"No, that's alright." He smiled then turned southward and whistled out with his fingers in his mouth. "What was that shot?" he asked. A horse, only 'bout a quarter mile away, was galloping northward, towards us.

"Shot a bird."

"A bird?" He looked 'round camp, saw no signs of it.

"It was following me."

He looked at me, my brother whom I had always liked. We'd ridden together, hunted, fought. All, years ago. I could always outshoot him but he could outride me. Or anyone for that matter. He was also the finest tracker and ranger anyone ever saw.

"You were mistaken," I said.

"How's that?"

"You couldn't've put a bullet in me. You couldn't hit the flank of donkey from ten paces with a shotgun."

"A shotgun?" he laughed, "Who needs one? Any blindfolded child, close as I was, could hit a shavin' jackass, squattin' there without a clue."

I laughed along with him. "What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"Scoutin'. I'm with a wagon train headin' north. Heard a shot, thought I'd better check it out."

"Who you scouting for?"

"Group of my people. Had some trouble down south. They're relocatin'."

"Same old?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Same old. Was heading to Bull."

"You in a hurry?"

"Can't see as it would matter."

"It'll be dusk in a couple hours; I'm headin' back. Been out awhile. The wagon train's a few miles from here. You could camp with us tonight." His horse trotted up. Scout held his hand out and patted the bay. He continued, "Now brother, besides, with you scroungin' around on the ground for dirty, dried meat, you could use a good meal. We got us some good cooks. I got my guitar, too, and the young ones would enjoy one of your stories."

I agreed, and he smiled. It was a big smile, one from a man who rode hard trails and knew to enjoy small things. I finished packing up and then we rode, south and slightly east. As we did, he asked 'bout the bird. I told him a little and with that, he asked a bit more. I told him more than I had planned and while the sun slunk down behind the mountains to the west, I saw a frown amidst the shadows on his face.

When Baron and Coyote tricked Place, trapped him in his desert, alone, never able to leave, Place sent word to Scout, asking for his aid. Coyote had taken Place's people, the First-Livings--called red--and Place asked Scout to get them and take them to him in the desert. Scout asked me to help.

We rode nine days and nine nights, through hard rains and sometimes, hard snows. About four days southeast of Purgatory, approaching the Black Ridge Mountains, we knew we were close. The weather changed by the hour: blistering heat, hard-biting hail, rain, wind, dust-devils. Once, a crack in the earth opened up right before us. With the ground crumbling beneath her, Olive was forced to leap forward. We barely made it to the other side. Scout, on his horse, was a few paces back, with the fissure widening before him, so he couldn't follow. We had to ride due south, alongside the black ravine, for a full day before the rift was narrow enough for Scout to cross. The chasm stretched for miles and peering down I saw only abyss.

But still we rode through the torment of the weather. The skin peeled on my face, my lips cracked and bled. But we knew we were close. The sky turned colors: blue, red, pink, orange, then hot rain fell, though no clouds were above. The rain pelted the ground which soaked it up, parched and spongelike. After a time, strange, small holes appeared in the dirt and water shot up--malevolent, ascending rain.

The horses cried out, galloped, and then from all sides earthen riders beset us. We saw not from where they came, and cared not. They rode sand-colored horses, some rode wolves, and their flesh was of dirt. Strange, earth faces smiled and their earthen steeds hurled them at us. Armed with only earth claws and fists, they flew at us, clawing, screaming. Scout and I unloaded our guns, sending volleys of lead thudding into the creatures, blowing faces and limbs off into crumbling clods. And, as they fell, horrible cries erupted all around: the sobbing of children, the wailing of women.

Scout, riding, firing, screamed and wept as the creatures fell, transforming into bleeding, crumpling people. I saw his people die beneath the hooves of his horse and I saw Pen and my son lying dying in the dirt. The nightmare was too real.

But we knew. We knew Coyote and we knew our guns and we reloaded, fired, cursed, and kept on. When we came to the place carved out of the mountain, all was still. A high cliff shaded a flat expanse of ground covered with clay figures, unmoving, frozen to the earth. Among them a small, gray canine sat panting, hind legs and tail to its front, almost like a man sits. I shot at it, sending it away, cursing in a human voice our mother, and its.

Scout dismounted and walked to the nearest figure. He touched it, rubbed the clay, then picked at it. Soon the clay he pulled away revealed a person: long black hair, brown skin-- called red-- and a gasping blue-lipped mouth.

We did this for weeks, unearthing, unmasking the First-Livings. As they emerged, they all said nothing, stood, and started walking to the west.

Night wouldn't wait for us. She blew in a gelid, sleepy wind so we rode cold and slow through the darkness. Scout was silent, as was I, and for a long time he seemed to ride aimlessly, his horse stumbling along and he, half-slumped in the saddle, looking asleep. It was that kind of night. The wind blew, in that chilly, teasing way that lulls you along into a pleasantly sad stupor.

Wavering patches of fire greeted us first, followed by floating voices and then the welcoming aromas of pork fat cooking, hot biscuits, and coffee. The camp appeared fairly large. There were eight or ten wagons, a remuda of some two dozen horses, and three fires going with several figures around each. We rode in next to a smallish buckboard, dismounted, and gave our horses to a young fellow Scout called Boike.

We walked over to the main fire, the one with the largest gathering of folks sitting 'round it, the one with the kettles, pots, pans, and good smells. People faced us and some said *bona*, I think it was, as we approached. Scout smiled and greeted the group. They all looked at me. Mine was the lightest skin here.

A few seemed to be greeting me but it was in a language I did not know. I returned in my own language and took a plate. As we dished up our food, Scout spoke brusquely in their tongue. He repeated the word *madala* a few times along with some other words, and seemed to be somewhat bothered. He was repeating a question but was only getting more in return. Finally, a woman got up from the ground and sauntered off.

Faces stared at us while we sat down among them. Scout took a bite of bacon and as he chewed, said, "This here's my brother."

The men and women looked at me then back to their plates. They ate and talked amongst themselves, using guttural words I didn't know. I washed my supper down with a strong, hot cup of brew. With words I knew, a man spoke up, to Scout. "Why does he need the bones?"

Scout said something I didn't understand. The man rubbed his tongue over exposed gums. He was missing several teeth. He turned to me.

"Do you believe in the bones?"

I told him that I didn't know a thing about 'em.

The cold wind whistled across the prairie. A jug appeared from somewhere and was passed 'round. I took a swig and liked it. It burned going down but it warmed me. I took another mouthful and handed it to the man who'd questioned me. He drank and spoke with some others. We sat

like this for quite awhile, with the jug going 'round the circle, and soon people were laughing.

Scout wasn't though. He kept looking over his shoulder to where the woman had gone. He scowled, squinting his eyes. Finally, he caught sight of something that pleased him. He tapped my shoulder and led me away from the circle. Fire-lit faces turned to watch us go.

The woman was with an old man who was sitting on a large mat next to a small fire 'bout twenty yards out of camp. Before him lay an animal skin, likely goat, with some bones, cut sections of bones really, scattered upon it. Scout motioned for me to sit in front of it. I just looked at him.

"For me. I want to know about this curse, brother."

He lay his hand on my shoulder. I sat, for him.

The old man was white-haired but his face was featureless in the hazy shadow firelight. He was thin, I could tell, and for some reason I thought he was smiling, but I can't be sure; it was just a feeling. He spoke quickly in his tongue and pointed to me. Scout told me to pick up the bones.

"Now hold them and breathe on them in your cupped palms," he said, "When the old man says, drop them on the skin."

The old man said, so I dropped 'em. He leaned forward to gaze at my toss, then looked up at me, whispering words I did not know. Scout asked him something. The man pointed at me and waved an arm over his head. Scout laughed and said

something else, then to me, "He says the bones tell him you're his elder. I told him we're brothers so now he says his head hurts."

Scout spoke again to the man, and then told me to toss again. I did. The old man looked. Scout cursed.

"Toss again," he said.

I did. The old fellow muttered something and shook his head. He clawed together his skin and bones and struggled up. The woman helped him away, mumbling as he walked. I heard her whispering to another person and then I saw that there were more than a few folks hovering close-by, many of whom were themselves whispering in earnest. I stood up next to Scout. He was shaking his head.

"The bones wouldn't talk," he said, "That one with the hole in it, it was face down. That means they won't tell a thing. Madala says he can't tell nothin' about no younger man older than he." Scout half-smiled.

"Let's go back to the big fire," I said, "There's no more to know than what I told you anyway."

The campfire was abuzz with talk. Folks looked at me as I sat, nudged each other, nodded, and shrugged. The jug was passed and I drank. Scout did as well. Soon the laughing started again, then some stories.

After awhile, Scout tired of translating and he let the others know. Looser now with a few of us having made friends, and not just with the jug, conversation I understood

began to roll 'bout and I rolled right along with it. One fellow told a bawdy tale 'bout a white farmer and a cow, and we all laughed. Then Scout found his guitar.

As he played, he told a little of our past together, some stuff intended to make me look bad. He gave the impression that I wasn't a man one should always believe, and he had that gleam in his eye and a forked, silver tongue. He gave me a good laugh and I wanted to return the favor, but the sky interrupted. Out of nowhere, light flashed in the distance and the night began to rumble above us. The wind picked up and a harsh chill coursed through camp.

Scout set down his guitar and people huddled in closer. Soon, we were in a tight circle. Scout pointed at me and spoke. "He fought with me in the Blue River War."

His face was serious, perhaps it had an air of challenge to it. Hell, that war was so long ago, I can't even remember the number of years. There were a few guffaws of doubt. Only a few. Scout looked 'round the circle. Soon, the questions began to fly.

But they wanted to know 'bout the bones. Why I needed 'em, why they had been silent. Many seemed struck by the fact that the old man had gone away unsuccessful. No one hid from Madala, they said. Scout spoke in their language, pointing at me. He shook his head, spoke some more. One man began to point away from the camp, then to me. He said many words, repeating some. Two, I understood. "Cassie, Big Cassie," he kept

saying. Scout raised his eyebrows. Another man, interrupted by some tremendous thunderclaps that shook us all, said that she could tell us.

"She's a fat, bloated, blind witch, but this is a night for her. She could tell you," he shouted over the howling wind.

Others shook their heads. Scout nodded his own, slowly. The wind roared through camp and a blaze of lightning flashed just above us. A child began to cry as the thunder struck. A couple folks cursed. Scout spoke.

"Alright. But leave us be with Cassie."

"Ain't no one want to join you in that," one man said.

A few voices concurred.

"Yeah now, I hear you," Scout said, "But how about now, before the young ones go to bed, you all want to hear a story about the old war south of the Azul?"

There was a chorus of yeah's.

Under heavy thunder and rain, I told one 'bout Scout and I on a raid into Padre's camp, years ago on Sangre Mesa, just off the Tipton. It lulled a few kids to sleep, perked up a few others. No one seemed to mind it except maybe myself, as I tired of hearing of my own hoarse voice. You know how it is. Some of the boys grinned and stared at Scout when I told of his deeds, all true. An elderly man recalled names from the war, Patrick Clausen, Hector Trent, Chrissy Delfy, and some others; I hadn't heard any of 'em spoken in years. The fellow had a better memory than I did.

The thunder played on, nasty in the sky, and the cold fell heavier and heavier upon us. I finished the telling and then we all drifted away from the fire. Most fled the lightning to their bedrolls or wagons, but Scout and I trod out of camp to see this outcast they called Big Cassie.

The wind blew so hard we had to hold our hats down on our heads and even our clothes flapped violently upon us. Her wagon was south, out of camp almost a mile, on the prairie. It took us awhile walking against the wind. Before I could discern any details of her rig, I caught the smell. It was excrement.

Scout said nothing as we came to her wagon. Hers was no ordinary rig. It was a big iron cage, covered above and on two sides by flaps of cowhide tied to the bars. It was bolted onto the back of a long buckboard. I gathered there was a hole in the bottom as something wet was splattering on the ground below it.

The woman was larger than anyone I've ever seen, before or since. Wrapped in soiled blankets, she filled the cage. Her massive head was not human scale and from it came a loud, deep, wheezy moan. I see well in the dark but it wasn't until a great flash of lightning lit up the sky that I could see the gray-blue dullness in her eyes.

Scout and I began to speak at the same time but were interrupted by the bellow of thunder right above us. It was a

bad night. My ears still ringing, I heard her begin to laugh. Her mountainous shoulders shook and rolled while she laughed and laughed, repeating the word *Madala* as if it were a great joke.

"Cassie, this here's my brother," Scout said.

She stopped laughing and began to moan again. The wind washed over the prairie grass and I held the locket in my hand. Her voice was deep and clear:

"I never had no white man. Why don't you put him in here? Never had no white one."

"Nah," Scout said, "This one would have to kill you."

At this, she began to laugh, harder this time and for a long while. Scout later told me she had murdered three husbands and after that had taken to mangling casual lovers. She looked it.

After the fit passed, she spoke: "So Madala failed and you want me to tell you what . . . what? Give me your hand, white man."

I put it through the bars and her heavy, fleshy hands grabbed quickly and pulled. I didn't give her any more, though. She spit, getting it as far as her right hip. She kneaded my hand and began to hum.

"Oh, can't you come in here?" she finally said, "Your wife won't mind after this long."

"You know 'bout her? Where can I find her?"

She whistled, then laughed a bit. "You know, I could bribe you. You come in; I tell you all you want to know. Hah. But no, no, no, truly, I ain't *truly* interested. I gave all that up, you see."

"Yes."

"Yes, I did. But you don't care about that, no. You want to know about where your woman is. Fellow should keep track, don't you think? Where's your woman? Where'd she disappear to during that war? Hmm, let's see. How can you get back to her? HmMMM."

She shook her head spastically, drool whipping out stringy onto her chest. I waited as she held my hand.

She surprised me with a great curse, then she shouted, "Hell, he told you she was on the other side. Gave it to you in writing, man! Good black hell, this one. He here now? Scout, man, what you bringing me here?" Her voice was higher now and was shaken.

"You tell me, Cassie," Scout said, "I want to know what it is this man's got followin' him. What can we do about it?"

"Good black hell," she screamed, plainly afraid now, "So you bring it here to me?" She dropped my hand and grabbed at her blankets, bringing 'em up, over her head. "Leave me. Take him," her muffled voice cried out, "Oh hell, Scout send him over the river. I don't want it here!"

"Cassie. Cassie, you safe with us. We're here, Cassie. Besides, there ain't no one else around."

"No, no. You both too stupid. Listen to what I say for once, jus' once! Feel it, brothers. We *ain't* safe. Feel it. Ah hell, what you bringing me?"

And she broke back into her rhythmic moan. Scout and I looked at each other, standing there on the cold, windswept plain. The big woman sat near us rocking, stinking. Something sick and wrong crept up the back of my neck. Scout felt it too. He drew his gun.

"It's like it's kin," I said.

"Yeah. "

Footsteps in the grass made us start. They came from the direction of the camp. I drew my own sidearm. The thunder and lightning were moving off, but the steady wind was weaving weird music with Cassie's moaning. I saw a figure stagger towards us in the dark. It was the old man, Madala. He walked towards us, his left hand held up and out, pointing .

"Over there," his voice wavered, and he pointing west, "Scout, *monna*, something over there."

Cassie began to scream. Scout and I looked to the west as Madala pointed with a slim, crooked finger. I don't know why I didn't expect to see anything. The night just seemed so unreal. But then there was something there. Cassie shrieked louder as I watched it approach, manlike, but too fast.

The old man slunk off a little ways and Scout motioned to me, then moved off a dozen paces to my right and knelt in

the grass. My neck felt as if it were on fire and I tried to track the figure with my gun.

It came like a whip crack. I fired once, twice, three times, and heard Scout following suit, when something rushed in. A moon white blur of a face careened right at me. I swung out with my gun and tried to sidestep, but a great, cold force hit me, knocking me down. I rolled on the grass and managed to just get up when it hit me again. Hell it was fast. I got a grip, this time, as it struck me hard, smack in the rib cage. I felt my breath go and heard Cassie wail nearby, but still I clawed at the ice cold flesh of its neck and clubbed at where I thought its head should be with my gun. We, it and me, fell to the ground with it on top, heavy and musty.

Gasping for air and frantically swinging at this nightmare, I struggled beneath it. A great chill was seeping into my bones. I saw its face, a pale white face I'd seen before. A fresh bullet wound, not even minutes old, lay between its eyes and a manic, sharp-toothed smile lay below its nose. Crazy, wet laughter poured down from its mouth.

I gave it all I had, cracking it in the mouth with my left fist. Then two big, brown hands grabbed its shoulders.

"I'm with you brother!" Scout hollered out.

But it roared louder, blood frothing on its beaten lips. It spun with incredible speed and force, knocking both Scout and I scuttling across the ground. We crashed into the wagon where Cassie stood, wailing above us. My head struck a wheel

hub. Blood poured from a gash on my brow and I scrambled up, helping Scout to his feet as well. Right then, something thudded into us, heavy on our chests, smacking our backs into the wagon.

It was the old man, Madala, dead, with his head crushed. I'd never know that face after all. Scout and I stood there, leaning against the wagon, with the dead man at our feet. I still had my gun but Scout had lost his. Cassie shrieked behind us, her cage shaking violently.

The nightmare walked towards us slowly, the white glow of its skin almost a blur. We stood waiting, me with my gun raised, targeting where its heart should be.

Cassie's wails grew louder, followed by deep, heavy grunts and the crying strain of metal bending. The buckboard shook behind us and the bars of her cage groaned in protest. I heard wood splinter and rivets pop as the fiend approached. Cassie was breaking out of her cage.

6 The Children of Death

Caly stands up, stretches. At her feet lay two still, gold-brown beetles. "Why did they have her in the cage?" she asks.

"I reckon 'cause she murdered three men."

"Do you think so?" she turns to me with a frown on her face, "Here, pour me a cup."

I take the flagon from the table, pour. "That's reason enough, I'd say." The scarabs are dead, I see, just carcasses. A web stretches diagonally from the corner of the table halfway down a leg.

"I suppose," she walks over to the window, "but it is interesting how you and your brother wouldn't listen to her."

"I was listening to her, believe me!"

"Do you think so?" she repeats.

"I do."

"I wonder--putting a woman with that kind of vision in a cage. You people over there on that side of the river, you think it's a man's world don't you?" She interrupts a bold smile with a drink from her cup. "All you do is talk of your brothers. What of your sisters, your mother?"

"Don't have any sisters that I know of. We lost our mother so long ago, it's forgotten, except perhaps by Place."

Caly walks back to the bed, "You lost your mother just like you lost your wife, is that it? But that's a story you never

tell over there--about mothers. Always tales about fathers and sons and wars and wanderings."

"That's not my tale, not the half of it."

She laughs at me. "I wonder if your absurd love affair with the west and the trails and your horse isn't simply your way of running from the way of things, from spring and summer, winter, from your mother?"

I feel my flesh heat up, sweat, my heart thumping.

"You're forgetting what I've told you."

"Do you think so?" she asks again, still smiling.

She has me, knows how to tighten the noose. "And let's not forget, you're the one keeping me in a cage," I say.

She laughs high and clear, the sound of sharding glass.

"It's funny you think so," she takes another mouthful of wine, "but do tell me, now, what happens to your captive prophetess? I'm curious and rather fond of her." She sits beside me.

Caly has such a bright, gleaming look in her eyes, it draws me in. They're like wine, those eyes; my head reels with pleasure as they pull me in further. I blink a couple times, sit up, and start again. I figure only the telling can break the spell.

Before the bars and wood could give any more, Cassie's girth and rage tipped the wagon over. It flipped onto its side, crumpling into so much firewood. The cage teetered a moment,

then collapsed into an iron heap. Cassie burst forth from this like a rabid bear.

We watched as she discarded the wood and iron scraps from her body, along with her blankets. The devil behind us laughed in seeming approval. Cassie, phlegm sputtering from her nostrils and loud gasps and grunts coming from her mouth, shambled forward, her eyes gazing beyond us to the source of her delirium. She moved past Scout and myself, towards our antagonist who laughed all the more. Cassie stood glowering at him, her massive bosom raising and falling in labored exertion. He took a step forward and Cassie started shaking. She began to moan, her voice quavering with terror. The devil continued laughing.

"They weren't listening to you, were they," he said in a voice, crisp and loud.

"I seen you comin', bloodless, I seen it," she began to shuffle to the side.

"Saw me coming did you?" He was moving to the side as well.

They kept walking like that, in a circle, I reckon it was, moving clockwise, Cassie wheezing and the fiend chuckling. Dust billowed up from the ground where they tread, and blew off in gray streaks. They were looking at each other.

"Go get my horse," I told Scout, my gun still trained on our foe, "It wants me, not you."

He shook his head.

I nudged Madala with my foot. "I don't want to bring on more of this. My horse."

Scout cursed and ran off.

"You cannot see at all, can you Cassie," the fiend was speaking.

"You know how I see," her voice boomed through the wind.

"Yes, I guess I do. What do you see now?" He was still circling along with her, the distance between them no longer than a body. He was tall, clad in a soiled city-suit. A man, but for the glow of his skin and the feeling he brought.

"I see myself goin' back to camp, knockin' a few skulls. I see myself leavin' the trouble you all have in the family."

The wind howled, sheering over the plain. The fiend began to sing a song I didn't know.

"No!" Cassie boomed.

"Perhaps you better go attend to your skulls, then," the fiend said, "We'll dance later."

"Like hell we will," Big Cassie said, moving off toward camp now, her face a blur in the windy, dust-streaked night. Her voice tremored a little, "I seen jus' now what's comin' to you. You ain't never comin' to get *me*." And though her massive body shook in fear, she spit. I saw the glob, saw the wind blow it off into the dark.

The fiend laughed, saying, "I promise you, we will have our dance."

But Cassie was ambling off, muttering, "No we won't, no we won't. You tastin' sand and wood, sand and wood. No we won't." And I heard her footsteps clomp along on the earth as she walked away.

The fiend turned to me and approached. He was now only twenty feet away. He smiled at my gun. It was a satisfied, macilent smile I'd seen before. Yeah, at the Whiskey Bucket, in Char.

"That won't do you much good," he said.

His voice was deep and smooth. I pulled the trigger and the slug struck him in the chest. This knocked him back a bit, but not down. He grimaced a moment, then laughed again.

"No, no, no," he said, "Look man, look where you shot me before." He tapped the closed wound between his eyes. "One good shot, anyone could see. I was impressed. But you see," he continued, taking a step forward, "It did no good."

Something cold welled up inside me. I was afraid. What could one do against this thing? He looked at me with evil black eyes, full of intent as he quickly approached. I saw the healing wound above his nose, a third black iris coming for me, coming in fast.

Fighting the panic in my gut, I shot my arm out and fired the revolver twice, two screaming blasts right at his face. This sent him back stumbling and wheeling, hands grasping at his eyes. I crammed the now empty sidearm into its holster and dashed to the crumpled wagon. In the wreckage I scrambled

and found one of the cage's long iron bars, which I pried loose with a couple of angry tugs.

The demon was shaking his head violently. Two bloody holes had replaced his eyes, though I feared not for long. Disoriented, he flailed his arms out blindly. I ran at him and swung, striking him on his right shoulder. He fell to the ground where I struck him again. The sound of the bar smashing into him sickened me, but in my rage, I kept at it.

Soon though, so soon, a cold mist began to appear all 'round him. I swung and swung but though he wasn't moving at all, I began to miss him, striking the ground instead. The mist was icy and wet and it was him. His body dissolved before my eyes and I began to back away, cold and shaking, scared. I heard hooves thundering up. The mist started rising before my eyes and Scout shouted behind me.

"Now! Get on!"

I knew I didn't have much time. So I spun and ran to my brother's voice. There, he had Olive and was himself atop a steed. I flew onto Olive's back and we rode like hell, away from the mist and Big Cassie's smashed buckboard.

For miles we rode silent, both of us looking back to see if it was closing in. After an hour or so I told Scout to go back to his friends, but he kept on alongside me. His face was tight, resolute. He would ride through what he had to with me, whether or not that included any objections. He'd done so

before. I knew not to press the matter. We rode hard for hours through the night and the mist didn't follow.

When the sun crept, hazy orange above the far horizon before us, my brother and I said good-bye. We stopped our horses there on the golden prairie and clasped hands. Scout's eyes were warm and clear and he spoke: "Take care."

I nodded, patted Olive, and rode on east, glancing back once to see my brother sitting there on his horse, alive and watching in the growing morning light. I rode to the sun, rising above me. Dew sparkled then vanished from the prairie. Clouds rolled by the sun and wind blew through the grass. Olive, panting, bade we stop.

--You ask too much. I must rest.

I apologized but she would have none of it.

--That thing you've brought upon us is of hell. If I can never rest at night due to its appearances, then I demand respite in the light of day.

So we stopped there on the prairie, under an active sky. I wondered what it had planned. I took the saddle off Olive, set it down, and sat down myself. In my bags I found some grub and my canteen. I ate a little and sipped from the metal lip. Fatigue sunk into my bones. Damn I was tired. Olive was right. We were being run down, run to hell. After awhile, I began to doze off.

I don't know just when I began to hear the singing. A woman's voice, from somewhere, drifted above the whispering grass. My eyes opened to a bright blue patch of sky. I sat up and listened. The voice was from far off. It sang a gentle, lonely tune, the words of which I could not make out. I felt groggy but got up nonetheless, and began to walk towards the sound. It was beautiful.

The day was growing warm, almost as if to usher in an Indian Summer. I heard my boots pound strangely on the earth as I walked. The grass got sparser, though no less tall. Clumps of it gathered here and there. I watched the shadows of the stirring clouds color the grass and dirt while the woman's voice sang. I took off my coat.

The song grew louder and was accompanied by the sound of burbling water. I walked towards it, my legs passing between thinning vegetation. My boot scuffed something in the dirt. It was a bone of some sort, half-buried. I walked on.

Ahead, I could see where nothing grew at all. As I approached this place, the singing and the sound of the passing, bubbling water intensified. There seemed to be a brook, perhaps a hundred yards off. The ground descended gently. The clouds above were fleeing, rolling away, full and white. The sun shone warm on my skin. I walked out of the grass onto the clay bank of the stream. There, in the water, I saw her.

Immersed to her chin, she sang, bathing herself. Upon seeing me she stopped and stood up with a start, in seeming alarm. Surprised myself, I took off my hat.

"I heard the singing," I heard my voice say.

She stood before me, waste deep in the water, and smiled. She ran her hands through her hair, pushing it, wet and golden, behind her ears. Her breasts swayed slightly, fuller and firmer than I'd ever known. Her smile was red lips and white teeth.

"You're a dirty man," she murmured.

I half turned around, looking away.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"You sing beautifully."

"No, dirty man," she laughed, "You need to come in and clean out those ears."

I heard gentle splashing and looked to her. Her mouth, closed now, smiled full and red. Her eyes smiled too, golden brown. My clothes I left in a clump on the bank. The water was cool and murky.

Baron's woman had been that beautiful. Never could grudge him that. His was the most beautiful woman living. She had eyes that drew yours in and yet looked right through you. They were the color of the sea.

I wasn't surprised when she turned up missing. Yeah, Baron went into a rage when she did, I remember. Then she

turned up at the Viejo ranch, just south of the Azul, with Padre's people, and Baron going there with a hundred gunmen and all getting shot up to hell, so he got us.

It was a long time fighting. I had a damn silly callous on my trigger finger and raw powder burns just about everywhere else when it was all through. Long time fighting. Long time ago.

Never wanted to go in the first place. Hell I was mad about that. Having to leave Pen and the boy. Will a day again pass when I don't think about that?

But it was alright in the war sometimes. Now and again we had a little fun. Lot of riding, lot of shooting. Must've been fun; didn't think much about them then. Be lying to myself if I thought I did. No, I had a good horse, a good repeater, two good six-guns. Only missed my single-shot. That would've come in handy.

Yeah, and when it was over. There she was. Talk of hanging the whore. Lot of that. I couldn't abide by that, no. Hanging a woman.

It was deeper than I thought. The clay bottom of the brook dropped quickly. My feet slid upon it until the water came to my chest. She laughed.

"It's not so deep over here."

She stood in the water before me, wet skin glistening in the sunlight. She smiled softly and rolled the water out from

her body with her arms in soothing waves. She was stunning to behold.

Something inside me told me to get out, but my head swam with confusion. I looked down and saw the locket hanged in the water. I took it off my neck, dripping.

"Forgot something?" the woman asked.

"Yeah. "

Heading for the bank, my feet slipped in the wet clay. She laughed as I struggled, holding the locket above my head. The sound of her voice laughing was music. It made me want to hurl the damn trinket and turn back. I almost did.

Right then, though, I noticed something. Hell, the locket was dripping, but not with water. Blood trickled off it, falling in droplets to the brook. I looked at it closer. I looked at my hand, arm, neck. No fresh wounds. Water simply flowed from my wet hand onto the locket. But the locket looked as though I'd dipped it in blood. What was this place? What had happened here? My pulse quickened. The water, flowing onto the locket, turned to blood. *Perhaps it wasn't water in the first place.* I heard splashing behind me.

"What's wrong?" I heard her say, "Lose the medallion and come to me."

She was swimming towards me, I could hear. My feet slid in the clay as I made for the bank, my toes sinking and slipping in the bottom muck. I scrambled to get out, now feeling her splashes on my back.

"What's wrong?" she asked impatiently, as I hopped out of the water.

Naked, I reached for my gunbelt. I heard her start.

"What are you doing?"

I turned around, smiled.

"It's not for you," I said, holding the gun down as I crouched at the water.

She backed away gracefully in the water, her breasts floating handsomely, her eyes looking hurt. I dipped the gun's muzzle into the water and pulled it out. Blood dripped off the sight, grotesquely. I looked over and saw her glowering.

"You're lucky you chose that for the test, cursed one."

I stood up and backed away from the beautiful creature in the water. I had half a mind to plug my ears with some clay lest she start singing again, but I didn't do it. I gathered my clothes and put 'em on. She spoke.

"You might as well drop the gun and let me have you. I'd be much more pleasant with your demise than my brother will be."

Her smile was evil, alluring. I felt dizzy a moment, and unsure. I shook my head, put on my hat, and took another step back. She looked at me. I showed her the empty chambers of the revolver, turned, and jogged off. Surprised, she cursed me as I ran. But I just laughed. Of course, by now I was getting nervous. This had gotten bigger than I expected. But after all, what was one more curse?

I met and saddled Olive back at camp. She wasn't too happy 'bout that, but I wanted to make Bull by nightfall. The town was still a long ways so we took off under graying skies, the day now cooler than it had been earlier. I rode east, away from where the sun sought rest. Over smooth, flat land, Olive trod, into country dimmed by a swelling bank of clouds.

7 Bull

I didn't ride straight to Bull. A few miles out I veered southeast and rode that way 'til I hit the Tipton Trail. On that, I headed due north, towards town.

They call it a trail but it looks more like a battlefield, a giant scar or swath cut hundreds of yards wide and stretching down all the way to Ciudad. On it, the ground stinks and most of the grass lays trampled and dead. On it, I recalled the war we fought across its back, a few hundred miles south where the blue river runs through.

Some cowboys passed me up on the Tipton. Yipping and hollering, they spurred their horses on by, galloping for town. Dirty, horny hands let off from what must be one of the last drives of the year, heading in for drinking and whoring. It's always the way. They were young and covered in filth. The rest of 'em, and the cattle, would roll into town in a few days, I knew. But I'd be gone by then.

I reached Bull in an hour. I approached Liberty Supplies on the left, spotting two riders coming east, silhouetted against the setting sun. The wind was picking up once again. Dust blew down the street and along the boardwalks. It colored the sky and the evening sun blood red. It looked like a good night to be inside.

I rode past the Dry Gulch, turning down the alley to the livery. I left Olive, tired and sore, there with my gear and

walked back to the street. To the right I stepped up on the boardwalk by Hank's feed store. The gray paint on the front was faded, almost white, and peeling. I walked down, past it and the bakery to Alexander's home. On the far end of this building, next to the train station, I turned and went up the stairs to the restaurant.

Halfway up, I stopped to look down at the town. A few people scampered here and there as the sky darkened. It was going to be a stormy one. I saw men closing shops for the night and saw shutters banging shut up and down the street. An old whore looked out her window, across the street at the Holy Mona Hotel, her face splashed in shadows. The wind roared above the rails and something flickered in the sky. I turned around and went up, into the restaurant. Thunder struck as I closed the door behind me.

It always seemed odd that he had his business on the top floor and his residence on the first. Backwards. But he was strange. Folks used to joke that he must've been from the East. He had a white, bald head that looked as if it were chiseled out of marble. Deep set dark eyes, too.

But he could cook. For twenty years he fed people there. Damn good cooking at his restaurant. It, the place where Baron called on me.

We said good-bye, Pen, the boy, and I, outside of town on Birch Bend, at the river. Had that early morning picnic. She

brought chicken. The boy and the dog rolled in the grass. The breeze was cool off the gray water. It was the last time I saw them.

And after the war, coming back through Bull to find them, my wife and boy, I went by Alexander's. Already old before, now he was decrepit, sitting there in his rocking chair, outside his door on the boardwalk. Chewing. Chewing nothing, just chewing, bobbing his pale, withered old head and rubbing his brow with his middle fingers over and over again. He just sat there, all day, every day, doing all this and rocking until they carried him in come nightfall. He couldn't get by then, on his own. Good thing, it turned out, he lived on the ground floor. Would hate to have to carry a dying man up and down stairs every day.

I sat down by the window overlooking the station and the tracks. The waiter had begun to shutter the window but I sat there and asked him not to.

I ate buffalo steak, greens, and some heavy brown bread. Had some good cold beer and later, half a sweet potato pie. The food was good, though not like I remembered it. But then, someone else had bought the place when Alexander had got too old. Still, it was warm in there and I had been hungry.

After the pie and a quick cup of coffee, I paid the bill and left. In the cold, down the stairs, I counted the dollars I had left in my coin purse. Twelve silver dollars plus four ten-dollar

gold pieces. I was doing alright, I figured. No need to find work just yet.

I crossed the boardwalk, went down onto the street and across to the Holy Mona with the wind blowing cold and fierce. Dust blew into my face, my eyes, but through it I thought I saw a figure looking out an open window, above the hotel sign. I jogged to the door and stepped into the lobby, wiping my face with a handkerchief. Red velvet wallpaper greeted me all 'round. Tall, white panel doors to the left led to the game room, and some ahead, to the dining room. To my right, a great curved bannister showed the way up to the rooms, and a black, leather-bound counter separated this, the lobby, from a thin-lipped, red-haired, monocled man.

He stood wiggling a quill pen as I approached. I noticed the back of my neck did not feel right.

"Would you like a room for the night?" the man asked.

He turned the register around. I nodded and he handed me the pen. His voice was high-pitched and nasal. I heard wheezy breaths going in and out of his nose and I heard heavy footsteps above us. The feeling slid up and down my neck.

I took the pen, looked at the man then down at the register. The pages it was opened to were nearly filled, those on the left dating back a year. There was one space remaining on the lower right. I brought the pen to this space and began to press. Footsteps came from the stairway. My neck blazed. I looked up at the man then back again to the page, at the

entries near the end. Lilly Miller signed yesterday, on the 25th; Daryl Chumtree, today, the 26th; Reg Simpson, also today; D. Verlaine, October 26th.

Dugan Verlaine.

The footsteps were heavy and I saw black trousers descending the stairs. I slammed the pen down.

"What's wrong?" the clerk asked.

Placing my finger to my lips, my heart beating like hell, I ran out, yellow as a cur, into the wind. Thunder bellowed as I did and raindrops fell down upon me. I ran. Ran down the boardwalk, passing the dark window marked "Attorney at Law," down onto the street, down to the alley on my left and stopped. No, he'd expect me there, to go for Olive at the livery.

I looked back, seeing no one. I slipped into the Dry Gulch Saloon. Once in, I fingered aside the curtains on the window and gazed out. Saw nothing. Turning around, I saw faces, card games, heard the piano. The saloon was full of townsmen, cowboys, and women, some of their faces trained on mine. I made my way to the bar. There, I got a glass of rye whiskey, paid the barkeep, and stood with my back to the bar. I sipped, watching the door.

A whole heap of card games were going on. Mostly cowhands playing. The saloon gals weaved through the tables. Some sat down on cowboys' laps, tousling hatless heads of hair. In the mirror behind the bar, I saw myself: big, dirty, haggard.

I watched the bartender cater to drunken cowboys. He was making money tonight and more would be coming.

I heard the door swing open. In the mirror, I saw a big man come in, real big fellow. He had at least a week's growth of sandy stubble on a heavy, aggressive jaw. He came to the bar next to me and motioned to the barkeep.

"Bring me a beer," he said and I looked over at him, surprised.

I recognized that voice. But the face, not that. No, I'd never seen the man before.

"Thanks," he said when the mug came.

I set a coin down on the counter between him and the barman. "On me."

He looked at me. Where had I met this man before? He looked 'bout forty, maybe older.

I pointed at the card tables, lied, "I've done well tonight."

"Oh? Thanks," he said.

His voice was rough and deep, sort of rocky.

"Just ride in?" I asked.

"About an hour ago. Good thing, too. It's gettin' stormy out. I reckon winter's coming." He took a mouthful of beer.

"You?" he asked.

"I've been here a few days."

He looked 'round, scanning the room. "I'm looking for a fella just come in. You seen one? Last five minutes."

Who was this man? "What's he look like?" I asked.

He looked at me. "He could fit your description or a lot of fellas'. I don't know but I'm told he just come in, one. maybe two minutes ago."

I took a sip and looked over to the southwest corner of the saloon and nodded. There were a few tables there with several men playing cards. "I think I saw a fellow come in and go over there. But I can't be too sure."

He looked over, took a step that way. "Much obliged," he said, "And for the beer."

I watched him walk to the corner, mug in hand. Damn, who the hell was the man? Who else was after me? I'd never seen this one before.

I stepped away from the bar and made my way through the cowboys, over to where the piano sat. There was a door there that led into the alley. Folks who stabled their horses at the livery and needed a quick beer came in this way.

I stood next to the door and looked for the big man. He was stooping, talking to a fellow at a table in the corner I'd pointed out. The man sitting was motioning with his hand towards the bar. The big man stood up straight and looked that way. As he did, his coat swung back a bit. I saw a glint of light come off something on his vest.

Right then, I knew who he was. I stepped out the door, into pouring rain. A covered gas lamp hung above the door, lighting part of the alley. I walked towards the livery.

The marshal. He was the marshal from Char Pass. Now I remembered. The one who was after the old man and then me. I'd heard his voice when I was up in that tree. Yeah, the man I'd punched in Char must've died and the marshal had finally made it back to his town. But he couldn't know that I was involved in both cases. No. And only that sorry deputy I'd grazed knew much 'bout me, and that wasn't much at all. The marshal must've been pretty sore with that deputy for letting me go, especially after he didn't catch the old man with that posse. Losing fugitives doesn't sit well with any lawman, so this one had followed me to Bull.

And that deputy must be along. He'd have to be, to identify me. He must've seen me go in and told the marshal, who then went in to flush me out. So, the deputy would be waiting.

A familiar click sounded and a muzzle pressed on my back right then.

"Hold it, mister."

It was him.

"You sonovabitch murderer," he continued, and I could feel his breath on my sore neck. "We're gonna kill you for what you've done."

But he should've killed me then. So close, I swung my right elbow back, hard onto his right cheekbone. I wheeled as he fell back, grabbing his gun with my left hand, and clocking him again in the face, this time with my right fist. He landed in

the wet dirt, hat to his side, bandaged head wobbling. I tossed his gun and came down with my left knee atop his chest. I covered his mouth with my left hand. With my other, I undid his belt and wrapped it 'round his wrists.

"I'm awfully sorry 'bout this," I said.

I got out my handkerchief and was going to stuff it in his mouth when the saloon door came open and a man stepped into the rain-streaked light. It was the marshal. I let the deputy fall back while I stood up.

"You sonovabitch," the deputy cursed me, and then louder, to the elder lawman, "Over here Marshal, look out!"

The deputy and I were just on the edge of the light and the marshal paused a moment, squinting. Some laughter then came from above. We all looked up and there, on the roof of the Dry Gulch, sat the devil, Verlaine.

"Marshal," he said, "That there's the man you unwittingly chased in the Blackridge Mountains. You were chasing the wrong reprobate, it turned out." He chuckled, went on, "Guess it's a good thing you found two other crimes to chase him for, or, maybe not. He's a kil--"

The marshal spoke, waving a hand in disgust, "Nevermind. I'll talk to you, whoever you are, later," and he looked at me, ready to draw.

Two other crimes? Verlaine stood up tall, and I heard him say, darkly, "No, man. I suggest you let me take care of him. He's mine."

I heard this right before the shot. In the wind and rain the blast did not seem that loud. The marshal stood with his arm outstretched, gun pointing at me. My gun was in its holster, warm.

The deputy laughed aloud. "You got him, Marshall. He's too slow. Shoot again!" He didn't understand what had happened.

The marshal just stood there. His hand quavered a bit, then the revolver fell from it to the ground with a splat. He followed suit, landing face down on top of the gun. More laughter came from above.

"Holy living hell," I heard the deputy whisper, looking wide-eyed at me, "I didn't see"

I shot again, this time at Verlaine. He fell back onto the roof, now laughing harder. I heard voices from within the saloon, holstered my gun, a bit slower this time, and ran like hell to the livery, my neck afire, the locket thumping on my chest.

8 Land of the Dead

Olive burst out of the stable with me on her back and I rode her southeast out of town. For a moment, the sky lit up with angry sheets of lightning, revealing a strange gray fungus on the back wall of the Dry Gulch. The stuff was also on the east walls of the residences next to the saloon, as well all over the ground on that side of town. These days you could see it almost everywhere. Olive galloped, splashing black earth from her hooves as we passed by the creeping death. The *east* had spread *west*, now even into Bull..

I heard a voice scream out, a shrill blare as we left town behind. It was the deputy's. Verlaine would be along soon. Thunder clapped all 'round and my head reeled with pain. I'd crossed death and now he was crossing me. His kin.

I rode Olive hard, eastward now, to the great river. Rain began to pour and the land, steaming all 'round us, smelled sour. No plants grew in it, it just lay there glistening, soaking up the fallen water. The rails to the north ran with me to the river. They glowed eerily in the night, a bright, white blue. I raced them to the water.

My mind raced along with Olive's legs. Where was I going? What, anymore, was I seeking? The old man, this mess had begun with him. Why had I saved him? That old man. Why had he come into the picture? Olive reared with a nicker

and grunt when we hit the western bank of the river. I held on, soothed her some, and guided her into a trot northward.

--Easy, friend.

--A curse of Death.

--Something we've never known. Olive?

--Yes?

--The old man

--Yes?

--What 'bout him? There was something.

--Yes. I recall something in the eyes. Lost, they seemed.

--Yeah.

I thought 'bout this as Olive took me along the riverbank. But I couldn't make anything of it. Everything was a mess. I didn't even remember how long I'd been riding, how many years I'd been searching. To a point, I now realize, continuing such a search would be meaningless. But I'd lost track long ago. Years ran together and it seemed as though there was just the journey and she and the boy were all but forgotten.

But I didn't know--I don't know. Things get cloudy after so much time. You ought to know.

A shadow then appeared on the river. A shadow, flat and gliding, with a tall figure on it. I watched it as I rode. It approached the shore, coming towards me. As it did, my neck began to sear. To my left I saw a rolling mist come in. It came for me and the feeling intensified. I spurred Olive on. We

burst ahead, flying northward. To the right the river rippled on by.

Olive gained speed over the dead, wet earth. We approached the rails which spanned the river ahead. Olive cleared 'em in one leap and rain pelted my face as she ran. The air was heavy and clinging and I was dripping wet. Olive's breath billowed out in rapid, vaporous puffs. I worried at how I'd pushed her. Her breathing was labored, painful gasping. Foam formed at her mouth.

I saw the bend ahead. The trees looked thin and dead. Olive galloped to 'em through the rain and the black mud. There, I had her stop. Her head hung low and her body quavered with each breath. I jumped down and held her head in my arms. Froth flowed from her mouth. All the trees, the old birches surrounding us, stood dead and jagged or lay down fallen. I held Olive and waited for the mist to come.

Olive. She'd been with me a long time. No ordinary horse, no. She was a gift. That wise gray-eyed woman from up the big mountain gave me the little wooden charm when I beat her at poker. I'd bluffed her. She said she was proud of me. I thought that was funny at the time. When I left for home though, outside, in the rain, I dropped it in a puddle. That was something. Made me spring back like I'd been snakebit.

A big, long-legged mare grew out of that puddle. I was shocked; the carved figurine was gone. And then she asked my

name and told me hers: Olive. She was great in the war. Got me through a lot, my little wooden horse. Afterwards as well. Miss her now.

With her head in my arms, I looked out to the river. It's quite broad; I couldn't see the other side. The wind blew small swells on the water. I saw the shadow again, gliding over the waves, the figure on it easing a great pole along the river bottom, slowly pushing the craft towards the west bank.

The small barge struck the ground soundlessly. The figure, tall and cowled, stood motionless, holding the pole. I gripped Olive's bridle and led her to the barge. Her hooves clopped hollowly upon it. She lifted her head to the figure, who then pushed off with the pole. The ferry moved from the bank.

I walked back up to the trees. The place was a lot different than I remembered. It was all dead. I stood in the rain, recalling the last few times I'd been there. With each visit, the place was more dead, my memories more faded. I took out my six-gun, held it in my hand, and waited.

The locket seemed to pull on my neck. My gunhand glove was soaked ice cold, holding the revolver in the rain. The rain made splishing noises in the puddles on my hat. The gash on my forehead bled slightly, a stream of blood and water slid down my nose. I waited.

The tune was whistled, deep and melodic. It came in with the wind and brought with it a familiar feeling. Winter

had come, gone were nights mild. He walked in between two dead birches, placing a hand on each. He smiled when he was finished whistling, and he bowed his head. "Uncle." The tip of his tongue gently caressed an oversized canine. "Do you like the tune?" he asked.

"It's your father's."

"Hmm, I suppose that could be construed as an answer based on the circumstances."

"Probably," I said.

"Yes, well, you'll be interested to know that I sang this very tune, Dear Uncle, just recently in Char Pass when I met that lovely saloon friend of yours, what was her name? Bessy, I think it was. She seemed to like it very much. I even hummed it for her as I kissed her neck, right before I drank her blood."

The gun was heavy in my hand. I turned away from him and walked down to the river. He followed.

"In Bull," he continued, "that deputy friend of yours, he I had to spare the music. I was in a hurry, you must understand."

"Yeah. And the fellow at Doc Brett's?" I asked.

"Ah, yes. I did pay a visit to him, but he was, um, already, well, deceased. Death certainly seems to follow you, one way or another, doesn't it?"

"Lately."

"Lately, yes. Uncle, very good. 'Lately!' How wry. Yes, well, I have to say good-bye now, though, Uncle. My father has given me business to--"

And before my eyes he lost shape and color and became a mist. In a gust it surged ahead, engulfing me in utter cold. I backed away, stepping into the icy water up to my boot tops. Cold choked me, suffocated me. I felt a numbing pain up and down my body and felt myself sinking to my knees. The ice water crawled up my thighs, to my loins. My head began to spin and I heard laughter. It was all 'round me: manic, crazed laughter. Hands materialized 'round my neck. Cold, cold fingers squeezed the breath from me. He stood above me, smiling, strangling me. I raised the gun but he kicked it away. The lids of my eyes began to close. My head spun and memories whirled.

I tried to grab him but he kneed me hard in the sternum. A wave of cold water hit me on my left. I struggled up. He kicked me again but I was able to stand stooped. I saw the barge to my left. I turned and lunged for it.

He fought me, his hands grinding into my neck. Mine grasped ahold an iron railing on the barge. I pulled but he began to wrench me away. I looked up, almost dead, to the boatman who approached, pole in one bone hand, the other empty and pointing at us.

"Only one," a voice hissed from within the dark hood.

A great clap of thunder exploded all 'round. The hands suddenly left my neck and I lay sprawled, half-on the barge. I looked to the shore with my head on its side on the wet deck. Verlaine, having just been blown back to the bank, was slowly rising, eyes ablaze. I wondered if he'd challenge the boatman. I heaved and swung my legs up, out of the water. An aching dizziness swept over me. 'Bout then, I think, I lost consciousness.

Something slick and damp moved up my face. I breathed in wet dirt, choked. Slick and wet moved up my face again.

--Wake up.

I did with a start, rubbing my cut forehead in the wet grit. I swore and spit out the dirt. My body lay face down on the east bank. Olive stood above me. Above her, gray light. I struggled up, wobbly, feeling for my sidearm. Gone, but the carbine in the saddle scabbard rested easy. I looked to the water. It was flat and empty.

--He'll be along. Let's go. Olive said.

She began to walk. I followed her up the bank, onto more dead ground. The earth this side of the great river was rippled and hard, almost serpentine. The cloudpack was heavy and gray above. The air: cool, acrid. We walked on barren ridges of dirt and small stones.

We walked a long time, both moving slowly. I felt bad. Tried some from my flask, but it didn't help. I tossed it. I

didn't like this place. Felt cold. The sky seemed low, just right above us. It looked like a pillow coming down on my face. A dirty linen, rock heavy pillow.

Olive saw it first. Ahead of us, down into a shallow valley, some lights shone, dark smoke wafted from chimneys. A town.

--Get on.

--Are you sure?

--Yes.

I climbed onto the saddle. Olive trotted down the slope to the town. Her scraping clops on the street surprised us. She slowed and stepped cautiously on the cobblestones. Ghost faces peered at us from dark windows. A pale shadow flitted down an alley. I saw a flameless light hanging above a door in a brick building marked 'Saloon.' Olive let me off there.

The door was heavy and stone cold. I pushed and walked into hazy, amber light. Two men and two women danced 'round a piano played soundlessly by a third man. They were thin, wasted people. I couldn't hear a thing, not their voices, not their laughter, not the music, not their feet shuffling in the dank sawdust.

They all stopped after a moment, looking over. The man at the piano stood up, his face gray and folded flesh. He walked towards me, quickly, pulling a blade out of a sheath on his belt. And then, a hand fell on my shoulder.

I wheeled to my right. A sickly, bony arm went from my shoulder to a gaunt, rag-covered, long-haired body that held a glass in its other hand. The body's mouth was talking but I couldn't hear it. A thick, mottled, black tongue flicked between decayed teeth.

He, or she--I couldn't tell--was talking to me but the only sound I heard was that of my own breathing. The man with the knife stopped right by me, right close. But I wasn't going to do anything first. He held the knife with thick, white fingers.

The person with the glass shook the dirty thing and brought it, empty, to his or her lips. They moved rapidly, urgently. Then he, or whatever, grabbed the knife from the man and jabbed it into his wrist. I stepped back. The man smiled grotesquely. Nothing came from the puncture. No blood at all. The man/woman did it again. The other flashed his brown teeth then they both pointed at me, to the glass, and to their sickening, wiggling tongues.

I went over to the bar. They followed, the others too. I 'bout fell down from the stench. They smelled of decay, all heavy and rancid and hollow and spinning in the back of your throat. I held my breath and took the knife and the glass, setting the latter down. I lay my wrist sideways upon it. The glass took maybe two minutes to fill.

The long-haired person took it and tipped it to his or her mouth. Blood flowed in silently until the glass was nearly empty. Two gurgles finished it off. These, I could hear. The

man/woman looked at me with a nasty, bloody smile. My blood dripped off its chin.

"Why are you here?" it spoke.

The others closed in 'round me.

"I'm lost," I told it.

It took my hand and leaned in closer, its foul breath making my teeth grind.

"You. You don't belong here."

The others reached out to me, touched me.

"I've lost mine," I said.

"I don't know," the man/woman replied, "Go back."

I stood there.

Longhair looked behind me and spoke again. "You are pursued."

"Yes."

It laughed. "More blood."

"No."

It laughed some more. "Go to the pools."

"Where?" I asked.

"The nine pools. That way." It pointed.

One of the women reached for my head wound. I pushed her away violently. I left the saloon, shoving my way through the dead. Olive was waiting for me outside. I got on and we headed out of town.

Yours was the first pool I came to, though not the first I saw. The others were smaller; yours, more of a lake. Such a long journey here, it was. Olive, already tired, stumbled on for days it seemed. I don't know. How do you tell? She was staggering when we came to the water. By then, I was on foot, leading her. I saw the light from your cabin first, then the glimmer off the water. A small boat sat on the beach.

--Look ahead.

Olive raised her head and walked to the water. As she did, I heard the whistling and turned 'round. Didn't see him, but hell it was loud. I didn't know then of the badlands' echoes. The song blew throughout the land like a haunted autumn wind, but it wasn't coming closer. I turned back just in time to see Olive lower her head to drink.

Her tongue dipped into the water. Right then, it happened. I ran to where she had been but she was gone. Only a small, wooden figurine was there, floating just out of reach of the shore.

"Olive!"

Olive, gone. I stood and watched the charm slowly bob away on the ripples of your pool. The whistling grew fainter. As you know, he wouldn't find me that night. No, he wouldn't find me for a long time.

I got the boat, pushed off, and hopped in. I rowed away from shore, losing sight of the charm. I looked and looked but could no longer see it. Verlaine's tune drifted away as I rowed.

I rowed to your island. Took a long time. It's further than it looks. But then, you know that; it's your doing. Of course, then I met you. You took me in, fed me, warmed me, wouldn't let me leave.

9 Now

Caly sits on the bed smiling, lips slightly pursed. She yawns, back arching, arms outstretched, then curls up for a moment, licking her teeth. I have finished the bottle of wine. She takes another from the table and drinks. She hands it to me. My throat is dry. I drink.

"Looks like he's not coming tonight," she says.

"Night?" I can't help but mutter, "There can be no night in this place without days. "

She stands up, laughs, and puts on a robin's egg shift.

"You are a fool," she says, "How has it ever been any different for you, here or on the other side? Days and nights run together, Wandering Man, when you live forever."

She peers out the window. I sit, silent.

"But you know, you actually know. You just like to ride, that's all."

She walks to the door and goes out. I am tired so I lie back on the bed. My eyes close and I sleep.

I wake up, eat, walk, sleep again.

This is how it often goes. Don't see her for several sleeps, only the cabin, the small island, the cold lake around me, the dim, heavy sky above. Sometimes I go to the water. Sometimes it is murky but other times it reflects. My eyes see differently than others'. This I know. Sometimes I look into the water and see my reflection and it is horrible. Sometimes I look at the

reflection of my eyes, green and worse. In that reflection I see myself looking in the water. I am looking into my eyes which show me looking and it goes on forever. I kneel for long periods of time trying to find the end to this tunnel of reflections, going through this rifled tube that continues and continues and continues deeper and deeper. And I keep going to find the end.

A touch on my cheek while I gaze, kneeling on the beach. This breaks it.

"He is coming," she says.

I look up to her, then sit back in the sand. My head is reeling.

"Come in," she says, looking into my eyes.

Hers are suddenly tired and grave: rich brown irises surrounded by bloodshot pink. I stand up in the sand walk to the boat. She comes forward, quickly. I grab an oar and turn around. She is close, watching me. Oar in hand, I walk past her and go to the house. She follows. Inside, I grab a knife and take it with me back out to the beach. Here, I sit and begin to carve.

"What are you doing? Come in, I said. Why don't you come in?"

The wood is dense and hard, the knife, barely sharp. It will take a good while.

"How far was he?" I ask.

"He was in the town, sharing a meal with them," she says, "Gathering his strength, no doubt."

In town. I will have a few hours, at least, even at the rate he moves. I continue carving. She is talking but I don't listen. She sits behind me, watching as I work. Flakes of the oar fall to the sand. Her fingertips touch my hair, then stroke my back. The knife feels good slicing through and rasping across the dead wood. The oar slowly shrinks in my hand, slowly taking new shape.

She leaves, going into the cabin herself. The air is getting colder, heavier, the sky, a bit dimmer with thickening clouds. The flat of the oar is now gone, cut away. Shavings lie, piling up on the sand between my feet. The knife blade is warm with the friction of its labor. I slowly rotate the oar in my left hand, bringing the knife down again and again onto the wood.

The oar is no more. Just a pole with a handle on one end. I cut the knife into the other. It will be the point. The skin on the back of my neck begins to crawl. I look up to see a mist rolling in, over the water. I bring the knife back down into the wood. A flake is cut from the pole. It is flung by the blade a foot away. Caly opens the door of the cabin.

"Come in," she says once again.

I don't. This, I must finish. I cut quickly. The point begins to form, taking its shape from the blade. Will I live to see it done? The mist flows in.

"Come in!" She is angry.

Verlaine himself steps onto the beach in front of me. He is smiling and licking his lower lip. He looks down on me, sitting with this knife and pole in my hands. His hands open and close.

Caly shoots between us, a blue blur. Like living water she moves, and the back of her hand flies out, striking Verlaine in the face. He is knocked backwards, into the air above the lake. He dissolves into a mist before he can fall to the water. I remember once before, the first time he came, she blasted him into it. We didn't see him again for a long time.

This time, though, he is ready. The mist curls up like a great wave and surges ahead, changing into a swift, twisting spear. Caly, now of flesh, screams out. The fog spear streams in with a deafening blast. Caly throws up her hands and there is a great clap of thundering blue light. Blazing hot water flies all around. I am soaked, scalded, and the beach is steaming.

They are upon it, Caly lying, her head slowly shaking, Verlaine crawling towards her, his heavy, pale hands clawing the sand. Steam rises all around. My heart pounds as the point finally takes shape under the knife. I hold the stake in my palm then balance it atop the back of my hand. The knife, I stick into the sand. I walk to Verlaine. His mouth is open wide, smiling, tongue hanging out. I step closer, my neck prickling, and kick him hard in the chest, flipping him onto his back. He lies in the sand and begins to laugh.

"Alright, Dear Uncle, you may die first!"

He begins to rise. I whip the stake up from my side and bring it down, plunging it into his chest. The wood tears through flesh and bone with a wet splintering sound. Verlaine smiles up at me, surprised, then the smile fades. He falls back as I push the stake deeper, through his back and into the beach. He screams out and the sound of it explodes upon me, knocking me back onto the sand. I lie sprawled on my side, watching him writhe and buck, trying to break free. Blood sputters out from his mouth and he is choking. I get up and walk to the knife. This I pick up and take to Verlaine. With it, I finish the job once and for all, soiling myself with his cold blood. I hear Caly moaning and watch her struggle to her feet. I don't think about it much. I just walk to the edge of the beach, drop the bloody knife to the steaming sand below, wade out and dive into the numbing water.

Down, down, down, down, spiraling, sluicing, down in the water, head first, dizzy, spinning down, further and further in terrible coldness. My head whirring inside, I twist and sink deeper and deeper, darker, deeper, darker

A jolt. My face lies dry on a wet plank. My eyes open and gaze up. A tall, cowled figure holding a pole stands above me. There is pain somewhere between my ears, then darkness, silence

An airy voice calls out. "Get up."

I am lying on a barge under a dark gray sky. Drowsiness abating, I sit up. We are at the shore of the river. The boatman points to the land. His voice speaks again.

"Nobody has no place here. Nobody never began. Nobody never ends. Go."

I stand and walk off the ferry, onto the beach. The boatman pushes off with his pole and I watch the barge glide over the water. Soon this vision shimmers, then dissolves into shadow. I turn and walk up the bank, recognizing where I am. Birch Bend is a ways up north, to my right. The ground here by the river is dead, worse than before. I tread upon it, southward, my boots sinking a bit with each step in the black muck.

Free. It's been so long it's hard to fathom all this space. Wish I had a horse. I could get farther on a horse, could get into some sun sooner, and be among the living. I'd ride and ride all day in the sun if I could.

After a time, I see billows of smoke rising into the air, ahead where Bull should be, perhaps a few miles. I continue walking, feeling cold. The land is foul all around here, worse than I remember it. The sky has the rainless grayness of the badlands. Soon, there is a tall building ahead. It is perhaps forty feet high with yellow-lit windows. Another new building, shorter, but with tall smokestacks, pumps black clouds into the air. Bull has changed.

I stop walking and think of what to do. The belt pouch has coins inside it. My clothing feels warm and dry enough, though I can't tell the season. I am unarmed. The locket hangs from my neck, a reminder. I have that. But no food, water, no horse. Still, I can't stay here and I know what I'll find now in Bull. I turn and walk west.

I walk and walk. Walk for days I think, though there's just this grayness, this dead sky. I walk. My feet blister, then bleed, their boots scuffing over dead land. My stomach howls. I see the sun for the first time in years, setting beyond the mountains ahead. The sight is lovely, for a moment, warming. But the air cools when the sun is down. I walk, I hobble. The ground rises, soon climbing steeply along a trail on the side of a cliff. Water is rushing, off a ways and far below.

I am walking among trees. They blot out the starlight. I'm not seeing right. Everything is blurry. I stumble and the locket pulls me down. The ground is soft loam. I think I'll rest here awhile. Just awhile.

"What's wrong with him, Daddy?"

"Dunno. Fran, help me with him. Tommy, get the door. Hold it open. You ready, Fran?"

"Annie, run in and open up Granddad's room. Yes, I'm ready."

An arm wraps around my chest. Hands grasp my ankles.

"Okay, one, two . . . umph."

"He sure looks heavy, Dad. Can you do it? You okay, Ma?"

She drops my legs.

"I can't do it."

"I'll help, Dad."

"No that's okay, Tommy. I'll drag him from here. You go out and unhitch the mules."

I think I'm taken inside. The air is warmer. I want to help them. Can't. Too weak, sleepy.

A spoon stirs, sloshing in a porcelain bowl. My eyes open. I'm in a white room on a bed. A woman sits next to me holding a tureen of soup.

"Good afternoon," she says.

She is not quite middle-aged. Her hair is a light brown and she's wearing a green gingham dress.

"Where am I?" I sit up slowly, leaning back.

"Granddad's old room," a little bright-eyed, blonde girl speaks out. A slightly older boy, her brother he looks, about nine pulls her gently back from the bed.

"My farm," a man's voice comes from behind the children, "Seven miles out of Char. "

He's middle-aged, gray. Has that resigned look aging men get in the jowls, slack and pallid. Clear eyes, though one is bruised and blackened. Left arm in a sling.

"You need to eat," the little girl says. She points authoritatively with a chubby little finger. I'll try not to grin. Just nod, gravely.

"Annie, be quiet," the woman says.

"I'll take her," the man says, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Come on, Annie. Tommy, you help your mother."

The man and his daughter leave the room. The boy and the woman look at me.

"You hungry?" the boy asks.

"Chicken soup," the woman says.

"Yes, thank you."

The very first mouthful warms my body. The soup is good; hot and salty, thick with noodles and carrots. The boy holds the lid for his mother while she feeds me. When I am finished, she takes the lid. He takes a glass of milk off a chest of drawers and gives it to me. Well-trained boy; loves his ma.

"Ma'am, that was tasty. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says.

The boy watches me as I drink. His eyes are dark and keen. He takes the glass when I'm through.

"You need sleep," the woman tells me.

She's right. My body has begun to slide back down. She covers me with the blanket and they leave together quietly, shutting the door with a light click.

The room is dim when I wake. My body feels warm, refreshed. I stand and walk to the window. It is dusk. Shadowy fields stretch out from the farmhouse. There is a well, a barn, a vegetable garden, and a corral with three horses roaming restlessly in circles.

I smell meat simmering. I look around, see clean clothes folded neatly atop the chest of drawers. Looking down, I see I'm wearing someone's nightshirt. A dresser sits by the wall across from the foot of the bed. On it rest my belt, coiled with about half its ammunition, my vacant holster, the locket, my belt pouch. I don't see my clothes. I look into the mirror; my hair is clean and trimmed, my beard, shaved off.

These people. Decent folk, Pen.

I grab the clothes and put them on. They almost fit-- just a little short in the sleeves and pant legs. I find my boots with clean socks, slip them on, then go out of the room, following the smell.

The kitchen is small and cozy. The woman is carrying a pot from the wood stove to the table. Spoons in hand, the children sit eyeing each other. The man stands folding up a pouch of tobacco.

"You up?" he asks, his face solemn, appraising.

"Smelled the food," I say.

"Have a seat, have a seat."

I do.

"Daddy, he looks funny in your clothes," the little girl giggles.

The woman, setting the pot on the table, sits, as does her husband.

"Hush, Annie," she says.

"You look like you're feeling better," the man says, setting a corncob pipe gently atop the table, his wife watching him.

"Yeah, I feel quite well. I thank you people for helping me out."

"No trouble," the man says, now ladling some beef stew into his boy's bowl.

The woman hands me bread and butter. The little girl drinks from a glass of milk and smacks her lips. The food is served all around and we eat in relative silence. I have three helpings of stew and wipe the plate clean with the bread. The food is delicious. I drink cold water to wash it down.

"Gosh, you eat a lot, Mister," the boy exclaims.

"Tommy!" mother scolds, "Mind your manners."

"It's alright, alright. I just appreciate good food."

A cool breeze seeps through the shut window. The woman gets up, walks to the stove, and grabs an iron handle with a wool mitt.

"Kurt," she says, lifting and looking in, "We need more wood."

The man looks at her, then to his son, "Come on, Tommy, let's go out."

She readies a pot of coffee as the man and boy go outside. The little girl sits staring at me. She's a cute one, Pen. You'd like her. I smile.

"Thank you ma'am," I say to the mother, "Sure was a fine meal."

"You're welcome," she returns, "Annie, finish your milk."

The girl giggles. I excuse myself and go out.

Kurt and his son are just off the porch. A lit lantern hangs from a hook under the eave. The man, his arm in the sling, is showing the boy how to chop wood. The boy is struggling with an ax nearly as tall as he is. I walk down the steps. There are several chunks of wood lying about. The man looks over.

"You got another ax?" I ask.

He looks down a moment. I see his left eye is puffy and swollen. He looks back to me, squinting a bit.

"Behind you, under the porch steps."

I turn to see a small door under the third step, and open it. I pull out an old hickory stocked maul and a wedge, one in each hand. The wedge is heavy, cold iron, the stock, smooth and well-worn. Nice tools. I go to it.

Tommy is struggling along and his father instructs. The man is patient but firm. The ax is terribly heavy for the boy but he is determined. In my hands, this maul feels alive. I pound through the wood. I soak in the cool night air. After

awhile, the boy has to rest. I do so as well and they look over at me.

"Thanks for your help," the man says.

"I'm much obliged for yours."

There is a pause, then, "Well, we just saw you there, lyin' on the ground. Couldn't just leave you, what with no horse, no provisions." He stops. The boy sits on a block of wood. "What happened?" the man continues.

I say the first thing that comes to my mind, "I lost my wife, my boy."

"Bandits?" Tommy asks.

"Yeah."

"Your pouch. We didn't check, but it felt like money in it," the man says, "Is it all there?"

"I think so. My horse is gone, though. I walked a ways. Got lucky with the money, I reckon."

"What happened to your horse?" the boy asks.

"Drowned."

"Come on, Tommy," the man says after a bit, "Back to work."

We go to, splitting a good deal, working up a good sweat. After half an hour, the man speaks. "Let's take some into mother, Tommy." They each gather an armful, the boy helping his injured father. "You comin' in?" the man asks me.

"I thought I'd work a bit more."

"Well, ah, okay." They walk up the porch steps. "Hey," the man says, "Latch the door after you come in, alright?"

"Yes. "

They go inside. I swing away, pounding iron on iron, iron through wood, until the lights go out in the house. I stack the wood on the porch then sit down on the steps. Could only I die someday, Pen, while working like this. That would make me happy. The cool air sucks up my perspiration as I sit here in the dark. The wind blows some, rustling out there in the wheat. It's late. My legs creak when I rise, stiff in this cool breeze. I reach to the lantern, open it and snuff out the flame. Then in the house, latching the door. I find my room and the bed. Something stirs in another room. I lay back, my head sinking deep into the pillow.

The morning light is bright, shining on my face through the window's wispy curtains. I get up, wash my face, dress, and go downstairs. They've eaten already. A plate of eggs and bacon sits next to a loaf of bread on the kitchen table. I sit and dig in. The food is still warm.

"I wish you wouldn't go, Kurt," I hear the woman say outside, "It's just too dangerous. "

"Well, damn, Fran. I didn't make it last time and we need those supplies."

"Kurt Jeffries! I"

I take one last bite, slurp down the milk and step out onto the porch. The woman is leaning over its wood railing, beseeching her husband. Seeing me, she stands up straight and silent. The man sits on a buckboard, a shotgun across his lap. Tommy holds the reins to the two mules hitched to the wagon.

"Morning," Kurt says after a moment, "Thank you for stackin' that wood."

"Yes, thank you," Fran says.

"Good morning," I say, nodding, "Say, you going into Char?"

The man looks at his wife and speaks deliberately, "Yes, I am."

"I'd like to go along."

"I reckon that's okay."

His wife is looking down at her hands.

"Hold on," I say and then go inside and upstairs. In the room, I slip the locket over my neck, put on my belt and holster and grab my money.

Fran is in the kitchen when I come down, putting something in the oven. Her face is taut with tension. I go outside. They're waiting. I get on and the boy gets the mules going with a low call and a light jostle of the reins. We head out, rolling north. To the right, before the gate, little Annie waves a dirty hand at us, smiling and kneeling amongst pumpkins in the garden.

The sun is radiant yellow, the sky a crisp blue. It is autumn. Again. How long was I on the other side? Was it indeed years? Seems so. Now Caly is alone. Verlaine, gone. And I, back among the living. I've weathered my brother's curse.

This trail is different than the one I know. We bump along, northwest, white jagged peaks gleaming before us in the morning light. Below us, the ground is trampled, the trail, broad. The meadow grass is sparse, eaten away. It looks like a cattle trail.

"What's this?" I ask, pointing at the ground.

"What?" Kurt asks.

"The trail, I don't remember it this wide."

"Where you been?"

I just look at him. He turns away, stares ahead, holding the shotgun.

"The dead have Bull, the Tipton. All the drives moved west. Cattle go into Char Pass now."

It has been awhile. Long time, Pen. Makes sense though, with what I saw in Bull.

It takes the rest of the morning, Tommy handling the wagon most of the way. His father takes the reins a few times, holding the shotgun between his knees. He points things out to the boy, giving him instructions, then hands the reins back to him. We roll into Char with the sun directly above us. Icicles hang from the eaves of the buildings, dripping in the melting

glare. The town has changed, expanded to the south side of the rails. There, a new general dealer, a new saloon, hell, even a new church to replace the one that burned down north of town I don't know how many decades ago. I remember that church, remember how they found the old preacher one morning, frozen at the altar. Waiting for answers, no doubt.

Kurt, now, is guiding the mules. They take us to the new dealer, a place called Wayne's. Tommy stands in the wagon, his eyes scanning all around. We stop. Kurt looks at me, speaks, "We'll be about an hour."

I hop out and walk north over the tracks on cold, hard ground. Wade Bent's livery has grown, though now it just says "Bent's." He, or someone, has added a corral and another barn. The Whisky Bucket, Fat Nelly's, and the other establishments look about the same, except for the barbershop, up and running again. I walk over to Fansem supplies and step in, out of the cold. It's dim and crammed full inside. An old woman and a timid man, standing half a step behind her, greet me.

I buy a second-hand revolver, a box of .45 ammunition, a pack of cards, new hat, shirt, trousers, socks, and a woolen poncho. I don't have enough for a decent winter coat. I leave the place with five dollars and forty-four cents to my name, all my things, except the six-gun, wrapped in brown paper and string-tied.

I walk over to the Whisky Bucket. The saloon is bustling, busier than I've ever seen it in the day. It's warm with bodies,

those of cowboys, saloon girls, townfolk. Behind the bar is a fellow I don't know.

"What'll it be?"

"Beer. "

He fills a mug, brings it over. I put two bits on the bar. He doesn't set back any change. I turn and see the mirror on the far wall, reflecting faces, movement, the haze of cigar smoke. I'm pleased to see it. No one here will remember Verlaine.

An old man and a boy come in and walk up next to me, at the bar. The boy is young, maybe Tommy's age. The man looks too old to be his father. He orders a beer and a sarsaparilla.

My own beer is flat and sour. Frank must not be running the place any longer. The rye whisky is probably bad now, too.

The piano is not playing but the saloon is loud with talk. I hear the boy next to me call the man Granddad. The old man is telling the boy stories, it seems. About an outlaw. The boy listens intently, his eyes open wide, very serious. I think of the boy I've lost.

". . . and everyone knows he always wore a gold locket around his neck. Inside he kept daguerreotypes of his latest victims."

What?

It is the old man talking at my left. The boy is looking up at him, big-eyed, mesmerized.

"How many did The Misfit kill, Granddad?"

"Four from Char that I know of. He killed a man in a card game, right over there, with his bare hands. Also killed a saloon girl, then later Marshal Schofield and a deputy named Powers. All were from here, but he killed them two over in Bull. They say he also shot a banker in Junction City and a haberdasher in Ciudad."

"Gosh, Granddad."

"Heck, even Marshal Higgins and his brother had their hats shot off by him. He's a bad one. Shot up ev'r place he ev'r been."

I suppose he's right about that.

"How long ago was that?" I interrupt.

"Huh? What?" the old man looks at me.

"When did all that happen? When did that outlaw pass through?"

"--and cause all that mayhem," the boy adds.

The old man and I both look down to the child standing there between us, his cowlick barely past the old man's belly. The boy takes a sip of his sarsaparilla. The old man scrunches up his face, coughs.

"Seven years, I'd say. Heck, seven years this very month. Why I myself saw him kill that fellow in here. Cross was his name. The Misfit knocked him dead with one blow. He was a big fellow," he nods at me, "bigger'n you."

Seven years. Hell I was on the other side a long time.
Seven years.

I feel a gentle tug on the back of my shirt. I turn around and see Tommy standing there. No, he looks a bit older than this other boy.

"Pa says it's time to head back," he says, "He sent me to find you."

"Okay, Tom." I set the mug down, nod to the old man.

We go out into the crisp air. We walk off the boardwalk, past the livery, coming at length to the tracks which we step over. Here, we spot the men.

Tommy's eyes open wide, his jaw dropping in alarm. I touch his shoulder with my left hand, then lift it to my lips.

"Quiet, Tom. Hold this."

I hand him my package and jog towards the scene. Jeffries is backed against his wagon, facing me. Two men are standing before him, one holding Kurt's throat and busted arm, the other a step back, holding his shotgun. Their backs are to me. I draw my gun.

The man holding Jeffries is shaking him. Jeffries grimaces in pain as his arm is wrenched.

The other man curses and spits tobacco juice, "Stinkin' sod buster." He holds the shotgun tucked into his left side.

I step up behind him. Around his left arm, I reach with my own left, grabbing the shotgun halfway up the barrel. With a jerk I pull the barrel into his face, then wrap that same arm

around his neck. With my right, I jab the revolver into his back and pull the hammer back with a loud click.

"You boys got a problem," I say, my mouth right at his ear.

He gives up on the shotgun, instead trying to struggle free, but he's fat and weak. I shake him up some and his hat falls. The other fellow wheels around.

"Tell your sweetheart you don't want to die," I say to Tobacco Juice.

"I ain't nobody's sweetheart," the other fellow says, reaching for his gun, "You go ahead and kill him, then I'll kill you."

I take a step forward, bringing Tobacco Juice with me. I look into the other's eyes.

"I wouldn't do that," I tell him, "I'm bettin' I can put a bullet right through your pal here, on into you."

He stares at me, his hand stopping about four inches from his sidearm. He swallows. I walk Tobacco Juice, all silent flab now, in closer, watching his buddy close.

"Jeffries," I say, "Take his gun."

Kurt is standing, tense. He takes a nervous step forward, pulls out the gun, and points it at his assailant.

"Now drop your pants," I say.

"What, mister?"

"Drop your pants."

Jeffries jabs the man with the gun. The man glares at me, full of hate, and undoes his belt and trousers, which then fall to his ankles.

"Get the wagon ready," I say to Jeffries.

"Tommy," he calls out.

The boy comes running, staring at the two men. He gets in the wagon, quickly sets down my package next to the few his father got, and grabs the reins. Kurt comes over and grabs his shotgun. He swings the butt, striking the man I've got in the face. I let him fall, slumping to the ground. The other man stands bare legs in the cold.

We get in the wagon, I with my gun trained on the man with fallen pants. Tommy spurs on the mules and Kurt stares ahead. He holds the shotgun on his lap and has the other man's six-gun tucked in his belt. The mules pull us on out of Char, southward, with the mountains looking down upon us. I remember that I'd forgotten to load my revolver. Might be a good idea.

It's a nice gun. Single action, good weight. My thumb and three fingers feel just right wrapped around the pommel. I hold it out and look down the barrel to the east where the dead are born. I bring the muzzle to the tip of my nose and feel the cold steel. Love the feel of a six-gun in my hand. I bring it down and load it, one round, two, on up to six.

I look at Jeffries. "What was that all 'bout?" I ask.

He doesn't answer for a long time, just glances quickly at me, then away. His jaw clenches, its muscles bunching up below his ears. He jostles the reins and the wagon speeds up.

"Cowboys," he says after a good five minutes, "Drives moved west. My land is right where they want to pass through--south of Char and all, and up against the mountains. My fences push them out further east than they want to go."

"Never met a cattleman fond of barbwire."

He curses and tosses the cowboy's handgun out of the wagon.

"Ain't no one fond of going east," he says.

Tommy sits, holding the reins, looking at his father. The boy winces briefly at his elder's ire but then looks ahead stoically. I slip my revolver into the holster. The leather is stiff in the cold air.

"How long has this been going on?" I ask.

"Couple years," Kurt replies, "First they asked could they go across my land. I said no and the law backed me up. Then they talked about buying me out. Made offers, the last one a month back. I said no each time. I reckon they finally got the message 'cause they started this new game last week. Fellas wearin' chaps jumped me out of Char, roughed me up good."

"Yeah but Pa whooped one of them good. Two punches to the gut . . . only there was too many men."

The boy looks at me, then to his father. The wind kicks up a little and we roll on through the cold. Mountain shadows

draped over us and after those, darkness. It's a long time before the lights of Jeffries farmhouse beckon. Tommy lets out a yip when he sees the place. We come to the farm in silence though, welcomed at the gate by the smell of supper cooking.

In the morning I awake to knocking on my door. I lift my head, open my eyes. The door creeps open and Tommy pokes his head in.

"Mister," he says, "It's time for-- say, Mister?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't even know your name, Mister . . . Are you The Misfit?" His hand holds the door, his eyes are focused, curious.

"What do you think?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

"Well . . . I think that old fellow at the saloon, I think he doesn't have as good a memory as he thinks."

"You're probably right, son. Now what did you come in here to tell me?"

"Oh, come on down for breakfast. It should be ready in five minutes, Ma said."

He looks around then goes, closing the door behind him.

Hot oatmeal, hot biscuits, hot coffee. I haven't eaten as well as I have these last two days, well, since I was with Pen.

She could cook, too. Yeah. You would have liked a little farm like this, Pen. Nice house. Good little life.

Fran and Kurt, Tommy, Annie, and I sit around the table. Everyone is quiet. The children look up at me then quickly look away, taking in mouthfuls. Kurt and Fran hardly touch their food. They keep looking at each other. I help myself to another biscuit and think of that old man. Another addle-brained totterer. Daguerreotypes of my latest victims, hell.

Fran coughs slightly, covering her mouth. She looks at me and speaks.

"I want to thank you for helping my husband yesterday. I--"

Kurt puts his hand on hers and speaks himself.

"Yes, I appreciate what you did," he says, looking briefly to her, then to me, "and I want to say that, ah, I don't know who you are or where you've been but, ah, I figure you're a decent enough man. I've lost some hands--got hired out from under me--had some horses rustled, and, well you can see I'm not blessed with the use of both arms right now . . . I reckon what I'm tryin' to say is, ah, if you're interested, I could use a hand around here for a couple of months, say 'til I get my arm back healthy. Can't pay you much of anything but I can give you room and board, plus a few dollars a month."

He looks at me then down at the table. His wife and children stare at him. I set the biscuit down on the plate.

"I reckon you folks have been too kind to me already, feeding me and all. I don't know nothing 'bout helping out on a farm and I suppose I should be on my way right soon. "

Their faces stare at me, Annie's with a bit of oatmeal on her upper lip.

"Can you bust broncs?" Kurt asks.

"That, yeah. "

"Then you know enough about helping around here."

I figure I do owe them for finding me and feeding me. Winter is coming; it would be better to ride west in the spring. Like her cooking. They are nice people, Pen. Don't meet many of those.

After breakfast, Jeffries takes me out to the corral. It's snowing lightly; clouds hang right above us. We lean on the wet fence rails and look upon the three mustangs.

"A red man sold me these five weeks back. I didn't think much of that small pinto, but I liked the big one, and the sorrel, he's a beauty. Fellow wouldn't break them up so I got the three for one-hundred seventy.

"I'd been workin' on the big pinto before I got hurt. I reckon he could be a steady mount real soon. That sorrel though, he's a mean one. Still can't come within ten paces of him without him breathin' fire. Don't know how that fellow caught him without gettin' himself killed."

We go to the well, fetch a few buckets and fill the trough, half-full already with ice. Jeffries then takes me into the barn,

shows me the half-dozen stalls, the replete hay loft, and a handsome wall chock full of tools. Annie comes in while her father is showing me his saddles and gear.

"Pa," she says.

"What is it, Annie?"

"Mama wants to talk with you."

"Now? Ah, hell," he whispers, shaking his head.

He takes Annie gently by the shoulder and leads her out of the barn. I had a feeling his proposition wasn't what his wife had in mind. Can't be sure though. Reckon I'll find out.

The barn is dim. The acrid stench of horse dung and urine makes my nose itch and eyes water. Never get used to it. Coils of rope hang from nails on the wall. I grab one and go out to the corral. I manipulate the rope, feel it rough and mean in my hands, and step in among the horses. The small pinto bolts to the far side of the corral, where the black-maned sorrel stands, eyeing me. The other pinto, three or four hands taller than the little one, stands right before me. I click my tongue and whistle, holding my hand out. The big stallion takes a step forward. I follow suit, holding the rope to my side and my other hand out, palm upturned.

His upper lip rises, showing me big, square, white teeth. I pat him on his withers, which tremble slightly. I hear movement to my right. The sorrel. He's big too. Not as high as this pinto but stronger-looking, stout. And high enough. His black mane is glossy, even in this gray light.

He trots up with a snort and rears. The big pinto moves off; I hold my ground. The sorrel comes down and forward, snorting loudly, then up again, lashing out with his forehooves.

I try to sidestep but an iron shoe catches me hard in the forehead. I feel my head fly back and my body goes with it. Good god! I land on the frozen ground and hear hooves thumping down after me. I tuck my arms and roll. The hooves crash closer and I keep rolling until the lower rail of the fence is above me and then is between me and those damn hooves. The horse stops and presses his chest against the fence. He nickers. I hold my blood-streaming forehead.

I get up and walk towards the farmhouse, my head ablaze, blood pouring all down my face. Kurt is stepping out of the house, half-turned to close the door. He turns his head and sees me.

"Holy river," he says, "What happened?"

"You were right," I answer, tasting blood, "That sorrel is a sonovabitch."

"You alright?" he says, stepping closer, bringing a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket. I take it and apply it to my forehead.

"Yeah," I smile, embarrassed I reckon.

He laughs and re-opens the door.

In the morning I go out with a bandage wrapped around my head, no hat. Three inches of snow lay on the ground and

on most everything else. I go into the barn and look at the sorrel in his stall. He stares right back at me.

"Not today, I know," I tell him.

I go to the big Pinto's stall and let him out. He will be the first. Outside, I see Tommy fetching water and Annie coming from the chicken coop with a basket of eggs. Smoke rises from the farmhouse chimney. Fran must be baking inside. Kurt's working out in the fields, doing what I can't tell. It's a busy life, theirs.

And it's my life also, for now. I toil, tire, and sleep and the days and nights start to melt together once more, even as the weather gets colder. It doesn't even take a week to get the big pinto broke. He's an easy-going bronco, long-gaited as well as good-tempered.

One morning, I hitch him to the railing on the porch. Jeffries, upon seeing this, smiles, takes the horse, and rides him all day. He calls him Garwood.

The small pinto, called Prissy by Tommy, takes a good while to break. Seems like I'm out there forever with the damn bronc. He's skittish and dim-witted, the right size for a woman's horse but not the right temperament for anyone. I tell this to Jeffries and he agrees. He plans to sell it.

The winter days come short and fast. Snow falls and the wind blows almost daily. I come in out of the cold everyday for lunch with Kurt. We sit and eat, listening to his wife teach

the kids the three R's. My favorite part of the day: there, warm, hearing their soft voices over the stormy winter outside.

But I love the horses, too. Even when I start working on Diablo, the sorrel. He's a real mean one. I get up every morning cold, chilled to the bone by the winter night, but by lunch I'm sweating, red-faced, and mad as hell at the stallion. Every day it's the same. He fights every step, but he's magnificent. He's muscled in bunches, fast, and strong-willed.

One morning I get up early, ready for him, dress, and go out. A foot of snow covers the farm. Tracks mar the white blanket by the barn and the door to it stands ajar. I go in and find boot-tracks in the sawdust. I check on the horses and mules. All there. But, at Diablo's stall I see a hole in the door, a hole looking like it had been kicked from the inside. Blood glistens on Diablo's right foreleg and hoof and a lathering of foam coats his mouth. I grab some strips of cloth and some ointment from the tool shelves and step into the stall. The sorrel is still. I clean up his wound and wrap it. I wipe the froth off his mouth. About when I'm done, his nostrils flare and he starts stamping. I step out, closing the door as he snorts. He quiets down only when I leave the barn.

Outside, I examine the tracks. Near the barn are those of men and horses. I follow them. Farther out, they're just those of horses, coming from off the farm, north, the direction of Char Pass. Later, I tell Kurt.

"I reckon they'll wait 'til you've got Diablo ready, then they can grab the three at once and destroy all that work," he says.

"We won't let that happen."

"No," he mutters, "we won't."

When the sun shines brighter and warmer on middays and when Diablo eats oats from a bag I hold or carrots from my hand, I notice the family is changing. Tommy, still alert, sharp-eyed, is growing, as is Annie, herself, into a lovely, clever girl. Kurt loses his sling and begins to chop wood, haul hay, shovel snow and the like. But Fran. Fran, still baking, cooking, cleaning, and teaching the children, Fran ripens. She grows swollen with child and her face takes on a rosy hue. Kurt's seems to as well, as he looks upon her with pride. He knows what a beautiful woman is and knows how lucky he is.

On the day when I go out and the snow is mostly gone, melted away, on a day when Tommy sits on the fence at the corral watching, as he does so well, on this day I set the saddle once more on Diablo, hop on, hoping he won't throw me far, landing hard, jarring my tailbone, hoping he won't turn his head to bite my leg, on this day that the sun gleams so bright off the snowclad mountains, so much that I can hardly see, on this day Diablo shows us.

He holds his head up, still and proud, as I give him a little spurring. He steps forward and takes me once around the

corral, smoothly. Very nice, Diablo. I steer him towards the center and he follows my lead. His gait is powerful, full of potential. He takes me to the midpoint of the corral where I stop him.

"You look good, Diablo," Tommy says.

Diablo nickers and bobs his head. Then, he bursts forward. With a great bound, he takes me flying over the fence, right next to Tommy. Olive would have been proud. We shoot across the farm like an angry streak of lightning. I hear Tommy's voice calling out as the horse clears the front gate. I hold on, heart pounding, with wet muck splashing up on me from Diablo's thumping hooves. The land rips by.

I'm a little late for lunch. Diablo flies to the farmhouse like a fierce wind, his great chest swelling with strength and exertion. On the porch stands the family, Kurt, Annie, Tommy, and Fran, due now in a couple of months. I hop off Diablo, sweating, exhilarated, and hand the reins to Kurt.

"Diablo," I pant, "is here."

Spring has promised to arrive but today the air I breathe in is bitter cold. Kurt tries to ride Diablo this morning but the fiend bucks him off angrily, sending Kurt shoulder-first into a fence post. Kurt lifts himself up, curses, and proceeds to saddle the big pinto instead. He'd planned to try Diablo on the trip to Char, with the small pinto in tow, to sell. Now, he takes off on

Garwood, leading Prissy. Jeffries hasn't a lot of faith in the smaller horse. Neither do I. Best to sell it.

I turn to Diablo. Might be best to shoot this damn horse. I'm embarrassed and ashamed. I get the saddle and gear. Someone's got to teach him manners.

All over the farm, I push him hard, then take him west, to the foothills, steer him up steep embankments, weaving among the trees. He's laughing at me. You want more Diablo? You do? Farther up, past that stump, where the rocks jut out, go. Come on, come on. What's that? Faster you want? Yeah, continue to the hill crest, higher, higher. Whoa, Diablo, whoa. No?

It is he who is taking me. We race along the ridge, cold mountain air blasting past Diablo's great neck flexes, holding aloft his proud, jutting head as his hooves beat on the rocks below. The pace is his, faster than I like, with hundred foot drops to the right and left. He takes me back down after some time, laughing at my having tried to break him. It is midday when we arrive back at the farm and it is I who am the weary one.

I stable Diablo and walk to the house. On the porch, with the smell of Fran's cooking calling me inside, I hear the rolling thunder of horses. Out on the plain rides Kurt, coming this way on Garwood, leading a frantic Prissy, and followed a few hundred yards back by four riders. I run out to the gate and

get there just as Kurt does, he and his horses gasping for breath.

"You armed?" I ask, as the four horsemen rumble towards us.

"No."

That's irritating.

"Tie your pintos, then," I say, pulling myself up to have a seat on the gate, knees up slightly, bootheels notched on the lower rail, "There's not enough time to git."

He does it. I unhitch my sidearm. The four men charge up and stop about twenty feet from us, smiling. Kurt turns around slowly, naked, as far as I'm concerned, as a newborn babe.

Two of the riders I recognize: the fat man who spat tobacco juice, and the talker who dropped his trousers. Another fellow, sharp-nosed and bearded, by way of his motions--pointing and the like--appears to be the leader. The fourth man hangs back a bit.

"Jeffries," Sharp-nose calls out, "you just don't seem to learn. Time we come up with a more permanent solution."

He taps the barrel of a rifle he's holding across his lap. The others laugh.

"I am unarmed," Kurt says.

"Well, that's awfully unfortunate for you," Sharp-nose chuckles.

"Why don't you wait for Mr. Jeffries to go on and get his gun," I interject, as placidly as I can, "Perhaps then you could teach him that lesson. I know I always see more clearly with a gun in my hand."

Sharp-nose looks at me then turns to Talker, who says something to him that I can't hear. The leader then looks back at me.

"I've heard of you," he says "Rumors flying back in Char about you. Wayne here says you're mighty rude. Guess we gonna have to do something about that, too."

I figure his rifle is cocked. All he's got to do is lift and shoot. I look at the others, figuring my lines of fire. It's like billiards, this part. You figure the angles.

I'd rather not shoot a horse. Hell, I'd rather not shoot at all but just have them leave. Yeah, but that won't happen.

Jeffries is plumb nervous. He's still breathing heavy and sweating. Other than that, he's deathly still.

Fellows don't figure a sitting man can be dangerous. But all it takes is a slight lift of my leg here . . . There, the sound I'm dying for--

My right boot rocks forward a bit and the gun slides into my hand as my knee raises. I fire the gun fast and bullets fan out spotty, like the feathers of a peacock. The first thumps into Sharp-nose who falls back, dropping his gun. The second strikes the fat man, who had drawn first, just as he fires, his

shot blazing past, a miss. My third misses the talker but the fourth catches the other man full on in the face.

Utter chaos ensues. Horses bolt under dead or dying riders. All the men are thrown clear except the fat one who is dragged, racing away, his fat foot caught in the stirrup. Two men lay dead on the ground, pretty bloody. I hear screams behind us. Jeffries stands, leaning against the fence, holding his heart. The talker is on the ground on his back, covering his eyes, his gun just inches away from his right boot. My left hand hurts and bleeds from a nasty puncture on its heel. Garwood's forelegs are high-stepping and he's pulling frantically at his reins. Prissy champs and sputters.

I holster my gun, walk over, and grab the talker's sidearm. I get some rope off Garwood's saddle and tie up the man. Jeffries stands watching me. His family runs up.

"Go inside!" he shouts.

The females grab the gate and shriek out in terror. Tommy just stands looking at the bodies, then at me.

"Go back!" Jeffries shouts again, moving towards them.

They turn and run to the house. Jeffries looks at me.

"Let's go get the wagon," he says.

We hitch the mules. Kurt starts heaving the bodies into the wagon. I take Diablo out to find the fat man. I wish it hadn't happened. Shouldn't've had to do it. My left hand

smarts. The bottom outside corner of the palm is bloody, gored.

We find the fat man and his horse quickly. Diablo's head bobs violently when he smells the blood. I dismount and walk over to the other horse. I cut off the stirrup, slap the man atop his saddle, and tie him to it. We lead his horse back to the farm; Diablo does not like the company.

Jeffries sits on his buckboard with the dead men and the tied talker behind him. I lay the fat man upon the morbid pile and hitch his horse to the back. Jeffries raises the reins.

"Wait a moment," I say to him.

I take Diablo to the barn. Garwood snorts as we come in. I unsaddle and stable the sorrel. Diablo, I'll brush you down later. Forgive me.

I go out, shut the barn door, walk to the wagon, and get in. I see Tommy's face in the window as his father guides the wagon north, off the farm.

We roll along in silence. Only the sound of the wagon bumping over the ground accompanies us--a sound like a bag full of walnuts, their shells rasping hollowly across each other when you jostle them. Kurt doesn't say a word. The mountains frown down upon me. I have killed. Killed in front of the family.

Darkness lands all around, heavy and cold and still. The trail is an eerie quiet with the rattle and jostle of the wagon through the night a conspicuous, vulnerable intrusion. It is a

long time until the lights of Char Pass call us: a dim flicker far ahead and above. The talker behind me stirs. I can smell the dead bodies. We roll along.

The train is there at the station, gas lights glowing upon it. Kurt guides the wagon down the street. Light and music seep out of the Whisky Bucket. A fellow sits outside of Fat Nelly's playing a harmonica. We pull up to the jail, right across from the boarding house. Kurt climbs down off the wagon, onto the boardwalk.

As he does, the jail house door opens. A fellow, holding a bullseye lantern and wearing a badge, steps out. He looks vaguely familiar, maybe someone I've seen before but haven't met. He closes the door behind him, apparently not seeing us. Kurt stands and coughs. The lawman looks over, lifting the lantern slightly. He looks to be in his mid-thirties.

"Kurt? What brings you here?"

I reach back and grab the talker by the collar and bring him on out of the wagon. Kurt speaks:

"We've had some trouble, Ray."

"I see," Ray says, stepping towards me and my prisoner, "Richardson, you boys still hassling good people?"

The talker looks down then back at the wagon. The lawman follows his eyes.

"Holy hell," he says, "What the hell happened, Kurt?"

His badge says Deputy. He walks to the wagon and with a grimace lifts a limp arm.

"Trammer's boys were carrying on again. They met me on my way to town then followed me all the way to my farm. They cornered me and my hand here"

"And you shot them all and caught Richardson?"

"Ah, I, ah, I didn't shoot. My hand here, ah, he-- They drew but I'd lost my gun so he"

Lost his gun. Again. I let go of Richardson the talker.

"You shot all of them?" the deputy asks me.

"He's a gunfighter," Richardson says, glowering at me, "A cold-blooded murderer. He shot Ned Guss, Dan Brown, and Jerry Trammer, all in cold blood."

"That right?" the deputy asks, turning to Jeffries.

"Well, he shot them, but not in cold blood. One of them drew first, I know. They didn't give me no chance to get a gun. I reckon he saved my life."

The deputy looks at me, his eyebrows scrunched. He holds the lantern to my face. I just look at him.

"No," he mutters, shaking his head, "couldn't be. Alright Richardson," he says, louder, grabbing the talker by the arm, "You come with me. Kurt, you go on back to your farm. I don't want you here when the rest of the Trammer hands hear of this."

He walks back to the door with his prisoner. I notice him glancing briefly at me. I untie the fat man's horse from the wagon and wrap its reins around the rail in front of the jail house. Kurt begins to unload the bodies there on the

boardwalk. I give him a hand. We pile them one on top of the other and cover the mound with a canvas tarp. I tuck it in all around, stuffing the material under a hip here, an arm there, a thigh, the back of a head. Hope the wind doesn't blow too hard tonight. Would hate to catch the smell back at the farm.

Kurt is back on the buckboard. He prods the mules. I hop on and we ride on out of town. The journey is long and, again, silent between us. Night surrounds us, heavy and black. Dark ground crawls under and by the wagon. The air is cold. We arrive late, one light remaining lit in the house. We unhitch the mules and stable them. I stay out awhile after Kurt goes in, to brush down Diablo.

In the house, in the bedroom, I undress and lie on the bed. The sheets are cool to the touch, the pillow, flat and dead. I lie in the dark. I must go, I know. Soon.

I awake to the gray light of a gray morning and go down to the kitchen. The family sits at breakfast, all quiet. There is food set for me. I sit and begin to eat. Fran asks if I'd like some coffee. No ma'am, I reply, putting some butter on a biscuit and taking a bite. But thank you. To Kurt I mumble I'm awfully sorry about Diablo. I let you down. No, no you didn't, he says, That horse just . . .and he waves a hand in the air, in mild disgust.

The children eat, watching. We fall back into silence. Forks ding on plates, spoons in bowls. Liquid is slurped. Fran gets up to fetch more bacon off the stovetop. I clean my plate and rise from the table. As I do, Kurt speaks up, "Garwood, though. Hey, that horse done real good by me."

I set the plate and utensils in the wash basin and walk to the door. "You," I say, "You did most of that." And I head out to the barn.

I get my gun belt, holster, and six-gun out from a drawer under the tool bench. I set it down on the surface and scan the wall. A metal file hangs there among many tools. I bring it down and take the gun out of its holster. I empty the chambers and bring the file to the hammer. It's too damn sharp. Cut my hand up bad fanning it yesterday. It hurt too much shooting those bastards. Can't have that.

Metal grates on metal. The raw edge of the hammer, defiant, is gradually forced down, even and smooth. The file is hot in my hand. I bring it to my cheek and it burns. I must go today, I realize, I don't fit here. I put on the gunbelt, then hang the metal file back on the wall. I hear men's voices outside. Diablo stirs and I go out.

Outside are three men. Two are mounted, talking to Kurt, standing upon his porch.

"Pipe down, Trammer," the man with a badge is saying, "Like I said, Jeffries, there are two reasons I come out here: One, to take a look at this fellow I've been hearing about, and

Two," he pauses to glance at the old man next to him, mounted on a big bay, "to make sure Mister Bucknell Trammer here assures you there'll be no more trouble. "

The old man's profile is dominated by that long, sharp nose. I believe I shot a son of his yesterday. He scowls and spits a brown stream of tobacco juice onto the ground.

"Now Mister Trammer should remember that I told him if I don't hear his word that there'll be some quiet, I will have to conclude that those boys weren't disgruntled by an obstacle, as he says, but were operatin' on his orders, as I'm inclined to believe. Trammer, I figure you've lost a good deal what with your boy and all but I'm willin' to take a little more if'n I'm not assured of some peace on this farm."

The marshal leans toward the old man with a hard, determined look on his face. The old man stares back at him.

"Jeffries," he says, still staring at the marshal, "I want to see the man who killed my boy."

"Goddamnit," the marshal exclaims.

"He's right behind you," Kurt says.

Surprised, the two men twist around in their saddles. I walk towards them. The old man's face is angled, wrinkled, with yellowed eyes brimming with hate.

"Good morning," I say.

"This here's Marshal Dan Higgins and Bucknell Trammer," Jeffries says.

I notice a splotch of mud on my boot-toe and scrape it off. "I met your brother last night," I say to the marshal, and to the old man: "and I shot your murderous son yesterday."

With a wretched scream, the old man lunges for his sidearm. I draw and aim my own as does the marshal. We both point at the old man who stops and quakes with rage.

"You got a bad way, mister," the lawman says to me while still training his gun on the old rancher, "Trammer," he continues, "you better ride on outta here."

The old man looks at Higgins then to me. "I'm going to kill you," he snarls.

The marshal starts to speak, but the old man howls out a curse and spurs on his horse. The three of us watch as he rides away, spurring and lashing his horse on in rage. Billowy streams of dust rise up from the earth behind him.

Gun in hand, the lawman gets off his horse and walks over to me. I holster mine. Close now, he tilts my hat back with the muzzle of his revolver.

"I've heard a little about you," he says, "Folks sayin' The Misfit is workin' for Kurt Jeffries . . . Nah, you ain't old enough. I run into him myself seven years ago, right before Jim Powers gunned him down. Fella' ages more'n that in seven years."

His voice is low and quiet, with his face close to mine. White hairs mingle with brown above his upper lip. He walks back to his horse, holsters his gun, and gets on the saddle.

"Kurt," he says, "I don't know what to say. I hoped for more. I'm ridin' back to Char. Gonna have to think on this."

Jeffries nods. The marshal spurs his horse into a trot. We watch him awhile, then I go inside, upstairs to the room to get my things. I put the locket around my neck and the poncho over my shoulders. I don't have much else. I head back downstairs and watch, for a moment, Fran teaching Tom and Ann their book-learning. Any day now they'll have themselves a spanking-new, shivering cold in this world baby brother or sister. Fran glances up at me quickly, her eyes warm and questioning. I look down and walk out.

In the barn on the tool bench, I gather the rounds I'd left there and slip them into the chambers of my .45. Kurt comes in as I finish. I put the gun in its glove and pull on my own.

"You don't have to leave."

"Yeah I do."

"It, ah, it ain't your fault what happened. I'd be dead now if it wasn't for you."

"Same goes for me," I reply, "You and yours saved me too--don't forget."

He is silent awhile, then: "I still owe you for this last month. I have the money inside. "

"Kurt, you don't owe me nothing. Thank you and thank the wife for me. You're good people. I got to go."

He hesitates, starts to speak, but then offers his hand. We shake and I leave. He stands in the barn doorway behind

me. Smoke rises out of the chimney on the house. I come to the gate, open it, then close it behind me. I leave the Jeffries' farm forever, walking on through the cool, cloudy day, toward Char Pass, dirt and grit crunching under my boots. My left hand hurts, the calfskin of the glove rubbing against the wound. This journey has gotten tiresome, I decide. Don't reckon I'll make it again.

Here and there small shoots of green poke out of the ground. Some wildflowers cling on a knoll to the west, shivering gently in the wind. Soft colors, they ripple with each mild gust. I wonder how long they can survive. There could be more snow to wipe them out.

After maybe an hour, the rickety sounds of a wagon bump along behind me. I turn around. It is Tommy, a ways off, on his Pa's buckboard, reins in hand, with Diablo tied to the back of the wagon. I watch him come up, all by himself, bundled up nice and warm. He's squinting as he pulls up. He brings the mules to a halt a few paces from me, and sits there, with the reins still in his hands. I look at him but don't speak. He gets down from the buckboard, goes behind it, and unties the horse.

"Pa wanted me to give you this," he says softly, walking up with the horse. He stops before me and looks up, still squinting, "Pa says Diablo's just mean is all, but he's a good horse. Pa says he's yours."

"Tommy, tell your Pa I can't take the horse."

He's quiet a moment, then: "No, sir. Pa says this horse is for you. And he gave me ten dollars he owes you."

Tommy fumbles in his pockets, bringing forth one, then a second five dollar gold piece. These people.

"No, boy. I can't accept all this. I got to be moving."

He fidgets, staring at the money. "Well, sir, my Pa gave me a job to do and I'd better do it. Please take it."

"Tommy, hear me now. Take that on back to your father. Do as I say; I'm your elder. "

"Sir, my father's older still. Please."

The horse stands there, his thews a burden on the ground below. His hooves scrape and sink into the earth. His head is raised all proud.

"No, he's not, son."

Tommy lets go of Diablo's reins and slowly drops his hands to his sides. He's quiet a long time. I can hear the wind kissing along the sparse grassland.

"You're The Misfit, ain't you?"

This boy.

"Yes, Tommy."

"I have to go," he says, barely audible. He walks without the horse back to the wagon and climbs on. Diablo just stands there, mean. Horse like that shouldn't have nothing to do with nobody. Tommy picks up the reins to the mules.

"Tommy," I say.

He looks at me.

"Tommy, I, that's just a name. I have a wife and son, a son like you."

He just sits there.

"Tommy, I can't just take the horse. Take that ten dollars on back to your father . . . as payment for Diablo. Would you do that?"

He looks at the horse but not at me, "Yes, sir."

He places the money in his coat pocket then coaxes the mules. The wagon starts to roll.

"Tommy," I say.

"Yes?"

"You take care of that mother of yours."

"Yes sir."

I watch him steer the mules, watch the wagon turn and roll away. I see the boy's small body atop it slowly fade on the southern horizon.

I mount Diablo and just sit, comfortable in the saddle. The sorrel stamps and neighs and swings his head back, trying to nip at me. Must know I stole him. Ten dollars. Those people.

"Get on now, Diablo."

He takes me north, like a bullet.

I realize I've got another fifteen dollars in my belt pouch. Should've given Tommy more. Strong-willed boy though; probably wouldn't have taken it. So, that leaves me more than

enough for a good meal, a bottle, and a little gambling in Char.
Can make me some money and leave before morning.

I'm warm, sitting on a stool at the bar, with the locket hanging from my neck, talking to an old man. An old man. We're in the Whiskey Bucket. Outside, Diablo waits, tied up in the dusk.

The old man. He's the one with the grandson, the one who told me about The Misfit. He's talking now. I bought him a beer. He's talking to me about a killer. A different one than The Misfit.

"Far worse," he says, "or, well, just as bad anyways." He takes a gulp from his mug. "In the end they found him still alive, shot more'n ten times, lyin' in a boat up on the Great East River. No, wait, it was the Plateau River. That's right, sodbusters found him."

Laid up in a boat on the Plateau.

"When was that?" I ask.

"When? Oh, seven, eight years ago I'd say. He was dyin' only he didn't want to be buried out there. Had some money for them to take him here. He had a reason to come rest in Char."

"What was that?"

"Kin. He had kin buried here. Wanted to be buried alongside his kin."

"What did he do?"

"Do? Hell knows where to begin! He led possies all over the Black Ridge Mountains. Shot lawmen dead, high and low. Shot the barber dead too, here in Char, just for cuttin' his hair shabby."

Just wanted to look the gentleman.

This old man sits beside me, beer-wet lips, a yellow-white mustache drenched and foamy. I order a bottle of rye from the barkeep, with two glasses. The old man and I partake. The whiskey tastes hot and bad. I feel it fire up my gut. The old man gasps and belches.

"Where's this barberslayer buried?" I ask, after a time.

"Over past the old church," he says, "Well, hell, bring the bottle. I'll show you."

Tombstones surround us, gray and hard in the dying light. The old man stumbles among them, stooping at several to read the epitaphs. Gray-green ragweeds sport little yellow flowers we trod upon as we pass among the dead. I resist the urge to laugh here in this place. My stomach feels funny.

The old man stops ahead of me at a pair of stones. He crouches, reading the words on the smaller of the two.

"Yep, this is the one," he says, "Right next to his mama. No pappy, I recall. Someone said he was buried at sea long time ago."

I move toward the marble marker, leaning forward to read it. Rest in peace, I see, and then below.

What? What? My knees give out. I sink to them in the dirt, reading the tombstone. It is, it's my son. My son! I hear the old man take a drink from the bottle, the gurgles going into him. That old man, something in the eyes, I never felt it. I never knew my own kin?

Almost can't look at the next tombstone. The locket weighs heavy on my neck, pulling me, pulling me six feet under. The next marker, the next marker--hers. My Pen! Beloved mother faithful wife fall to my elbows my wife lays below me my wife the chill of the hard ground seeping into my bones I lay above my wife and son a terrible groan grating in my throat Pen and the boy old dead gone clutching the locket to my chest I am cursed deluded no man lost Nobody just the journey was all lost in that Nobody

Footsteps scraping: those of the old man going away.

Starlight calls me up, brings me up to my knees. I see insects crawling upon her stone. I smash them with my palm, stand up and look back down at the graves with night settling all around.

They don't see me coming. Devil that I am, I see better than those miserable bastards. They're talking to the old man outside the Whiskey Bucket with my horse tied right next to them. This old man points toward the graveyard and takes

something in his free hand from one of the men. Selling me out. Even as he drinks my whiskey.

Two men: the old rancher, Trammer, and judging by the like nose of the other, a second son of his. The old granddad is talking, holding the bottle of whiskey and motioning at my horse.

I step onto the boardwalk and walk right up to them. They don't recognize me right off. I reach over with my left hand and grab my sidearm as I walk. All three men have now turned, looking at me. The grandfather's voice trails off into nothing. I cuff the youngest man with my right fist, and he crashes to the wood planks below. I grab old Trammer's neck, again with my right and shove him hard, thudding back into the wall. I pull the hammer back with my left thumb and put the revolver's muzzle in his ear. My hand squeezes his neck, but my breath comes in quicker, angrier bursts than his.

"Hear this," I hear my voice hiss, "Your feud is with me now."

The old man with the bottle begins to back away.

"Stop," I shout, "I want you to listen too."

"Now," I say to Trammer, "I will kill you. I will kill your boy here. I will kill any and all of your kin. I will kill every head of cattle you've got if you so much as look in the direction of Jeffries' farm. Don't send no one there, or I'll kill 'em. Don't bother Jeffries here, or I'll kill you. Do not ever think of him again. Do you understand?"

His lip curls into a sneer. This one's a cur. And I'm no good telling threats. I turn my head to the old man with the bottle. "Old man--"

And the brutality of what I do surprises even me. People file out of the saloon and stare over the old man's shoulders. Some are muttering, staring at the blood on the boardwalk. A cricket sounds under the slats. Maybe he got wet.

I turn to the old man. "You," I say, "You remind Trammer here of The Misfit. Help him remember that if he ever slips up, ever, Nobody will take care of him."

Some folks mumble. Trammer's son groans on the planks. The old man nods. I holster my gun and walk over to Diablo. I unwrap the reins, hop on the saddle, and head down the street. It's dark now, almost black, but I see a light. I go to it, dismount, and step inside Fansen supplies. They are just in the doorway, the couple, having watched what had occurred. They back away from me. I try to keep my voice calm:

"Trinkets, I need a trinket--something like this," I show them the locket, "I need something to remember my boy by."

"We don't, we don't--"

"What? I just need something to hold onto, something shiny and durable, a trinket to remember by."

"We don't--"

I look around, grabbing a lantern off a counter top. I see something shiny on some shelves above a rack of drab fabric bolts.

"There, what are those there?"

The woman walks over and brings down a velvet covered board with some time pieces on it.

"These are watch and chains, mister, not lockets. We don't have any lockets."

"That'll do," I say, "How much?"

"Eight dollars, mister."

I set down ten dollars and grab the watch and chain. It is gold with a twist knob and the chain is silver. I hear the hands tick as I walk out.

"Mister, your change--"

I rode on out of town with the locket thumping on my chest and the watch ticking in my pocket. For a while, I rode northeast, in dry, hilly country. Made camps at night in the dells, out of the wind, and was plenty warm enough with a fire. Couldn't sleep well, though. Couldn't sleep at all and in the morning my limbs were stiff. Diablo took me through days sometimes with me dozing hunched in the saddle. But after dusk, no sleep. Just the tinny, thin, prickly, snipit sound of the watch ticking all through the night. Never had much use for a watch before. Haven't gotten used to this one, yet, keeping me up all night with its whispering march, a march that goes around, crisply and delicately in the same direction the chambers of my revolver spin.

I think I'll veer west. This morning I saw a wave of wild horses flowing that way over a crest. It was a large herd with patchy cloud shadows spilling upon it. Proud Diablo ignored them but I, seeing those horse heads disappear over the bluff with each tinping watch-tick, I thought of Olive and was sad. So much time has gone by. Maybe further west I can escape. It's worked before. I'll just ride. There's this game you play with the west. Going west, you feel more alive.